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December 2014

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RED GROUSE BY ASHLEY GROVE



MOST crimes involving the persecution of birds of prey are never detected, and those that are can be notoriously hard to prosecute. So the recent conviction of a

Norfolk gamekeeper for the worst recorded mass poisoning of raptors in England can be regarded as a success, even if tempered by a derisory sentence – Allen Lambert, from the Stody Estate in Norfolk, received just a 10-week suspended sentence and was ordered to pay £930 in costs for slaughtering 10 Common Buzzards and a Sparrowhawk. Such lenient treatment clearly will not, as Natural England said it hoped, “prove a deterrent for others”.

The low detection rate of such crimes is inevitable because many take place on vast ‘sporting’ estates where there is little chance of them being witnessed or documented. Yet we know they happen because, as one insider makes clear this month (pages 36-39), raptors and other species have been steadily disappearing from Britain’s intensively managed grouse moors for many years; every now and again, the discovery of another poisoned Hen Harrier or Golden Eagle corpse serves to confirm our worst fears about what happens out of sight on private land.

After this latest case, at least it was heartening the National Gamekeepers’ Organisation stated emphatically that “we condemn these actions utterly”. No such condemnation was forthcoming from a different corner of the shooting world, however. ‘You Forgot the Birds’, fronted by ex-cricketer and keen shooter Ian Botham among others, instead set its sights firmly on trying to discredit the RSPB, despite pretending to care about birds. It even misused quotes from this magazine in a blatant attempt to borrow credibility from the birding community.

Let’s make it absolutely clear: we do not support this website or its spurious motives, to the point where we’ve actually referred the matter to our solicitors. All birders know that no organisation has campaigned harder on behalf of birds, their habitats and their welfare than the RSPB. By attacking the society rather than condemning the criminal elements of its own industry, ‘You Forgot the Birds’ has shot itself in the foot. Let’s take its ill-conceived posturing as a positive sign of the success of initiatives such as Hen Harrier Day and the huge public support it engendered.

Dominic Mitchell

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Birdwatch

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Garbage pickers *par excellence*

It may seem an unprepossessing landscape in which to study birds, but the humble rubbish tip comes into its own at this time of year. Gulls from across Britain and the Continent converge in large numbers to exploit the feeding opportunities presented by the discarded waste of our metropolitan areas. Exactly where do these birds come from, and how long do they live? To find answers to questions such as these, licensed ringers in specialist study groups around the country maintain a constant process of capturing, marking and recapturing these widespread scavengers to help build up a picture of their origins, movements and longevity.

Catching these large and aggressive species is not easy, and involves the use of cannon netting – firing a large net over the thronging hordes – to dramatic effect. The North Thames Gull Group (whose work is pictured here) carries out such work at key sites on the Lower Thames every winter,

and over the years has built up a considerable body of work on the species it has ringed, including scarcer gulls such as Mediterranean, Yellow-legged, Caspian and even Kumlien's. Birds like these Black-headed Gulls (below left) are quickly and methodically extracted from the nets, identified, ringed, aged, measured and weighed (below centre), and then liberated back onto the site (below right), where they rejoin the flocks almost immediately.

Such studies may have a finite life, however. In recent years the volume of food waste entering landfill has decreased substantially, with many local authorities opting to compost it instead, and as a result the huge gull flocks of just a few years ago are already a thing of the past in some areas. Better for the environment, perhaps, but not for the Red-listed Herring Gull and Amber-listed Great Black-backed, Lesser Black-backed and Black-headed Gulls. ■



PHOTOS: DAVID CALLAHAN



FINDER'S REPORT

With just two previous British records of this Asian warbler, the Eastern Crowned at Brotton drew huge crowds, especially as it lingered until Saturday 1 November.

Crowning achievement



Ian Kendall carefully chose a local birding location to take his dog for a walk, not realising quite how crucial that decision would become.

BRENDAN DOE

Eastern Crowned Warbler: Brotton, North Yorkshire, 30 October-1 November 2014

It was 30 October, and after returning from a predictably unsuccessful attempt to find anything in the patriotic homeland of Cornwall (now something of a tradition), the clocks had gone back, the winds were south-westerly and the prospects weren't looking good for finding anything in Brotton either.

Watching the *BBC Breakfast* weather forecast, though, I managed to focus long enough on the right-hand side of the screen to see that the winds were in fact from the south-south-east. Result! So our dog Flint's walk was going to be at one of three local patches, not the local woods.

Choosing Hunley Hall Golf Course, I opted for the classic dog-walking technique of leaving him in the car to quickly look at the plantation near to the hotel first, somewhere I rarely check. A quick circuit revealed good numbers of Blackbirds and a couple of Bramblings, but little else. Just as I was leaving the wood, however, I noticed a pale 'Phyllosc' in the last Sycamore. It seemed to fly across the road into some dogwoods, so I walked out to the edge of the wood to check,

but couldn't find it – another one lost.

I started to leave the wood, but as I did something made me glance back into the Sycamore, and luckily the bird was still there. I put my bins up and was stunned to see a green-and-white warbler with a couple of weak wing-bars; my first thoughts were "Bloody hell – Arctic!" It came towards me and I was struck by its gleaming white underparts and the long bright supercilium, set in much darker surrounds. Time for a phone call.

I phoned Mark Askew, saying: "I think I've got an Eastern Crowned, but it may be just an Arctic." Unable to share my excitement as he had to go to Doncaster, he agreed to make a few more calls. While I waited for back-up, I did a bit of reality checking. The bird showed pretty well, at one point turning its head on its side facing away from me, showing what I was sure was a fairly obvious central crown stripe.

I didn't have to wait too long before Graham Megson arrived, but the bird had moved further into the wood and disappeared. He'd interpreted Mark's phone call as Eastern Bonelli's, so when I was waffling on about confusion with Arctic, he must have thought they were the ramblings of a

mad man. Ian Boustead arrived next, and we split up and tried to relocate the bird.

The wood is hard work and the prospect of refinding it seemed slim, so I gloomily mused over the options for submitting the record, blissfully unaware of the coincidental date of the Hertfordshire bird.

After a few minutes, Ian Boustead shouted and came running up the path with the kind of athleticism only shown in the presence of a rarity, saying he'd seen it and was sure it was an Eastern Crowned. We found Graham and over the next half an hour we all got reasonable views, agreeing that the crown looked plain olive green and convincing ourselves it was Arctic after all.

Confirmation required

Mark Rowbottom was next on the scene, and after a few more views I'd now clearly seen a broad off-white patch at the rear of the crown, which, along with the gleaming white underparts, convinced me it had to be Eastern Crowned. This was getting frustrating. Mark provided the voice of reason, saying that either way others had to see it and we had to make a hard call on such a rare bird.

Mark's statement led to a

flurry of activity: comparison of some of Ian's photos with those on the internet; a few calls to people who could get to the site to help confirm the identification; a discussion with college friend Martin Garner; and a conversation with the hotel staff over parking arrangements. Others including Tom Francis arrived and confirmed the presence of lemon undertail coverts and this, combined with the suite of other features we'd seen, meant it was 'good to go'.

I'd told the hotel staff that it was a rare bird and asked if they would mind the presence of a few cars, assuming it was going to be an Arctic. Now another conversation seemed in order – there would be somewhat more cars. They were remarkably helpful and while my decision to park cars in the housing estate wasn't the best in the world, things seemed to go fairly smoothly.

The bird moved around a bit sluggishly, not unlike a Red-eyed Vireo, which meant it could be frustratingly difficult to pick up at times. During the afternoon it vanished for more than an hour and moved to the far side of the wood, where it was refound by Mark Askew (safely back from Doncaster) in a large leafy



JIM ALMOND (WWW.SHROPSHIREBIRDER.CO.UK)

The bird remained faithful to its chosen patch of Sycamores, allowing many birders to connect with it.

Eastern Crowned Warbler's long bright supercilium, white underparts and central crown stripe can be clearly seen in this instructive photo.



Sycamore, although it was still difficult to see and some people were unable to get onto it in the fading light. Fortunately, it remained pretty faithful to the corner of the wood where it was first found for much of the rest of its stay and showed well in fine sunshine through to Saturday evening, but evidently departed overnight.

It was a fine-looking creature, with some cracking features: the dark olive lateral sides of the crown, the clean white underparts, lemony undertail coverts, the often obscured median crown stripe and the pale lower mandible were all easy to see in a relaxed state, but it was

a big leap on first sight to call the bird, for sure. Thanks to those who helped in the process on confirming its identity – you know who you are.

Our little recording area can pay rewards for the endless hours of patchworking, and for that I'm grateful. Suffice to say I'll be checking the wood just a little bit more often in the future! ■

STATS & FACTS

First recorded: Trow Quarry, Co Durham, 22-24 October 2009

Last recorded: Hilfield Park Reservoir, Herts, 30 October 2011

Previous British records: 2

Mega rating: ★★★★★

Rare gull drops in to Dungeness yet again

The gulling hot-spot in Kent hosted Britain's seventh Audouin's Gull in October, though it soon went AWOL.

Audouin's Gull: Dungeness, Kent, 12 October 2014

BRITAIN'S seventh Audouin's Gull was something of a low-key event on 12 October. The bird, at Dungeness, Kent, was identified only after darkness had fallen and could not be relocated there the following day. Dungeness has very much established itself as a hotbed for occurrences during the species' 12-year history as a British bird: this is the third site record since Britain's first back on 5-7 May 2003; the other came in May 2007.

This record was also significant for being the first in autumn 'proper': all previous records have come between May and August, with the former month the most fruitful with three (others are represented by August (two) and June). As such, this second-winter bird exhibited a plumage not witnessed previously in Britain; all past individuals have been in at least their third calendar year, by this point exhibiting the characteristic clean head and blood-red bill that makes the species so distinctive as it matures towards adulthood. Impressively, the Dungeness bird was photographed alongside a Caspian Gull during its brief stay near the gulling hot-spot of the fishing boats. ■



Identified from photographs after the event, the Audouin's Gull (top and right-hand flying bird) was only seen by two lucky birders.

PHOTOS: DAVID WALKER

FINDER'S REPORT

A swift result

How about that? A week on foot to search for rarities in the Western Isles, and **Nick Davies** scored on his first morning.

Chimney Swift: Lewis, Outer Hebrides, 23-25 October 2014

HURRICANE Gonzalo obviously meant only one thing for most birders: the possibility of 'Yanks'. For me, however, it meant no work for the week, as I work at sea out of a tiny fishing village called Gairloch in the north-west Highlands of Scotland.

I decided to visit the Butt of Lewis for some land-based birding for a change. I was hoping for Gyr Falcon – at the top of my 'hit list' as I'd missed the species on several occasions. The plan was to take the ferry from Ullapool on the Wednesday morning, as I knew it wouldn't be sailing on the day of Gonzalo's arrival. I'd done some research on places to stay within walking distance of the Butt, and found a B&B with Loch Stiapabhat NR just over the road.

The ferry crossing coincided with rain and a big swell, but I managed

decent views of a Leach's Storm-petrel and all four skua species. I arrived at the B&B in torrential rain and gale force winds in the late afternoon, but decided to get up early and get to the Butt for first light on 23rd. The owners of the B&B informed me that it was film night and a few locals would be joining us for our evening meal, including a local birder, which could bring valuable information.

After a chat with Tony Marr over dinner about his latest sightings, I was eagerly anticipating the morning and got an early night. The weather forecast was pretty bad early on, but improving over the day.

After a two-mile walk, lit just by the beam from the lighthouse, it was still pitch black when I arrived at the Butt. Winds were gusting to gale force, and there were regular quick showers. I cowered behind the perimeter wall and prepared my camera with a 500 mm lens plus a 1.4 converter, and added

much-needed extra

layers and waterproofs!

First light was at 7.30 am, so I gingerly went west from the lighthouse to find the best view of the sea and the two stacks about 50 m offshore, which was very dangerous in hindsight and certainly not recommended in those conditions. I was very exposed to the elements, but the view was superb for seawatching and scanning the stacks.

Seabird action

There was lots of seabird activity, with swathes of Northern Gannets and Kittiwakes feeding about a mile out, just out of range of my 8x42s. The stacks turned up mobs of Twite, Starlings and Hooded Crows.

The wind chill began to kick in and by 9.30 am I was starting to shiver. I decided to pack up and go. Once past the extremely dangerous north path around the lighthouse, I had a change of heart and searched for a depression on the cliffs just east of the lighthouse car park, where I could shelter from the wind and the rain. I found a place with a restricted view of the sea and only the nearest stack, but I was comfortably warm.

The seabirds were still too far out and I started scanning

more inland and then sitting back down in my wee depression to warm up again. While horizontal, I saw a swift with an unusual flight pattern flit around the near stack and head straight towards me. What was a swift doing here at this time of the year and flying in from the Atlantic? Immediate panic! Bins or camera, camera or bins?

I decided on camera. I hurriedly unwrapped it and stood up, holding it in my hand while trying to locate the bird through the viewfinder – no mean feat in the gusting wind with the bird's erratic flight pattern. I managed six shots before it flew past the lighthouse and out of sight to the south.

Once I was sure the bird wasn't going to return, I viewed my shots on the back of the camera: four were perhaps in focus, but looked dark and only showed a silhouette. I checked my settings, and it seems that in my attempt to grab the camera I'd knocked the exposure compensation dial down two stops, and with the already poor light the images seemed inconclusive. I was gutted because I knew this wasn't a typical Common Swift. Choosing



Top: the Chimney Swift's all-dark plumage with a lighter patch on the throat, its much stockier build than Common Swift and short square tail are all clear in this record shot.

Left: the bird only lingered for a couple of days, but two intrepid birders managed to travel up to the Outer Hebrides from Cornwall in time to connect with it on the second day of its stay, and others came from as far away as London.

the camera over my bins meant I didn't get a proper look at it, but I knew it was all dark with a lighter patch on the throat, much stockier and with a short square tail.

I'm no expert on swifts, but I knew it wasn't a Pallid or Little Swift, so perhaps it was a Chimney or maybe a weirdly plumaged Common. I decided not to report anything until I could analyse the images.

I batted it out until 12.30 pm in case it returned, before hunger and cold made me start the plod back to base. Five minutes down the road Tony Marr was just on his way down to patrol one of his patches and we had a chat about the morning's events. Tony mentioned that he had recorded Common Swift before in November, so I started to doubt my sighting – perhaps it was due to delirium from the first stage of hypothermia ...

I had no way to check the images, as I had travelled light and hadn't brought a laptop. The owners of the B&B were out all day, so I spent the afternoon in the hide over the road. Then the incredible coincidences started.

At 4.50 pm I was scanning through the more than 400 European Golden Plover in the field next to the B&B without much success (I didn't have a scope) when I saw Tony returning to his car from the hide. He saw me and wondered if I was onto anything. We had a quick chat and he began walking back, when suddenly the swift appeared over the field. "Tony: swift!" He turned back, and it flew straight past us and he immediately called "Chimney!".

Lost and found

We lost it over the opposite field, so he got his field guide out and it looked good for Chimney Swift. The owners of the B&B arrived back and we asked if we could borrow their laptop; they willingly agreed. We enlarged one of the images and could clearly see the three projecting spiked feathers on the tail – a eureka moment.

With a roar and much

hand-shaking, Tony started the reporting process off while I went back outside armed with my camera. I was on my phone contacting BirdGuides when the bird returned once more. I dropped the phone and picked up my camera, but it was too close, apparently searching for a roost site around the eaves of the B&B. I ran in and shouted "It's back!". Everyone came back out, but it had vanished again. The bird returned at least twice more before dark and may indeed have roosted at the B&B.

I was up before dawn, ready and waiting for the swift to pop out of the eaves. So was Tony, and at about 9 am two more birders turned up all the way from Cornwall. An epic effort from Dan and Phil to get there, hopefully to see it before it set off again south. There was no sign as yet, and Dan and Phil had a deadline of midday to head back for the ferry. They kindly offered me a lift to Stornoway and we set off for the boat.

Five minutes into the journey Dan got a call from Tony that a swift had been spotted over Port of Nis, a mile from the B&B – it had to be the Chimney Swift, so in true Mika Häkkinen style we raced to the site, and – bingo – it was there in its beautiful glory, feeding over a field in great light. I was pleased to see it acting naturally, and even more happy for Dan and Phil to have succeeded in their quest. The bird was also Phil's 500th British species, so well worthy of celebration. ■

STATS & FACTS

First recorded:

Porthgwarra, Cornwall, 21-27 October 1982

Last recorded:

Farranfore Airport, Co Kerry, 9 November 2005

Previous British

records: 17

Previous Irish records:

14

Mega rating: ★★★★★

Sibe rush!

A rare thrush pulled from nets on Shetland was readily identified as the same bird trapped and ringed in a Norwegian village the previous month.



This smart first-winter female Siberian Thrush was trapped at Scousburgh, Shetland. It was bearing a ring that showed it was the same individual that had been trapped in the Norwegian village of Husøy the previous month.

Siberian Thrush: Scousburgh, Shetland, 15 October 2014

IN this contemporary age, vast improvements in both photography and communications technology have played significant roles in the ever-increasing number of relocating rarities tracked either cross-country or even, as in the case of the Siberian Thrush extracted from mistnets at Scousburgh, Shetland, on 15th, cross-continent.

Though there have been numerous recent examples of relocating rarities identified by particular plumage characteristics, it was the presence of a metal ring that made this particular individual instantly identifiable. *Birdwatch* readers will likely remember that last month we reported on a young female Siberian Thrush trapped and ringed in the spectacular Norwegian village of Husøy on 24 September (see last month's issue, pages 22-23); alarm bells were soon ringing given that the Scousburgh bird was the same age and sex and also possessed a Norwegian ring. Two and two were quickly put together to ascertain that it was indeed the same bird, thus

representing an impressive 614-mile south-westerly movement to reach Shetland.

The question therefore is where was this bird hiding out for the three weeks between the records. Given that Shetland has been as well-watched as ever this autumn and that the bird's discovery on the archipelago coincided with the first widespread arrival of Redwings of the autumn, the most likely prognosis is that it must have been staging somewhere in Norway for a quite significant time before making the North Sea crossing.

Arguably the most impressive find during the middle week of October, Siberian Thrush is still a very rare bird in western Europe and this represents just the ninth British occurrence (with a further two from Ireland). It is the third record for Shetland, following young males on Foula in September 2007 and Fair Isle the following year. Incidentally, this is only the second female to be seen in Britain, after a first-winter female appeared on North Ronaldsay, Orkney, on 1 October 1992 and lingered until 8th. ■

PHOTOS: NICK DAVIES

Cuckoos clocked

The remarkable occurrence of not one but two Nearctic cuckoo species was among a stellar cast of birds brought to Britain by Hurricane Gonzalo.

There are 73 accepted records of Yellow-billed Cuckoo, with the majority coming from Scilly and Cornwall, usually in October, so this bird followed a grand tradition.



MICHAEL MCKEE

IT'S been a long wait for either Nearctic cuckoo in Britain and Ireland. Though there have been a handful of dead, dying or brief individuals, the last twitchable Yellow-billed was in October 2000, while it's been even longer since the last Black-billed appeared on Scilly on 10 October 1990. As such, both species, particularly the latter, have made their way back up the lists of many twitchers' most-desired birds,

Yellow-billed Cuckoo: Porthgwarra, Cornwall, 23-24 October 2014
Black-billed Cuckoo: North Ronaldsay, Orkney, 23 October 2014

and no one could have foreseen the incredible events of 23 October.

Arriving off the back of the remnants of Hurricane Gonzalo, which had smashed into western areas in the previous 48 hours, both Black-billed

and Yellow-billed Cuckoos were discovered among a stellar cast of Nearctic vagrants between Shetland and Cornwall that also included Chimney Swift (see pages 10-11) and two Grey-cheeked

Thrushes, as well as a Hermit Thrush the previous day and a further Grey-cheeked Thrush on 24th.

Both cuckoos are notorious for tending to arrive here in poor condition.

Many are found dead or dying and a massive percentage of records are of one-day

birds, suggesting an unseen but likely morbid outcome. It is the commoner Yellow-billed that tends to produce the occasional stronger bird that may linger for a number of days; this may simply be due to a larger pool of records. Either way, the bird at Porthgwarra, Cornwall, on 23rd proved to be one of those.

Following its discovery just after midday, it went on to show well at times throughout the afternoon and, crucially, was both mobile and appeared in good condition. It was therefore no great surprise that it was still around the following day, again showing well, feeding avidly on caterpillars and generally seeming in rude health. However, a cold night followed and there was no sign throughout Saturday 25th.

But the most sensational news came an hour or so after the Yellow-billed, with Britain's first Black-billed for 24 years discovered on North Ronaldsay, Orkney. It transpired that the bird had been seen being pursued by a Merlin into the famous garden at Holland House, where it was located for a few minutes perched in a Sycamore before flying off strongly to the west, never to be seen again and thus joining the list of untwitchable occurrences. However, this record – coupled with the bird in Brittany, north-west France, in November 2013 – will nevertheless give birders renewed hope that another accessible Black-billed may yet come our way. ■



LEE FULLER

Arriving off the back of Hurricane Gonzalo, the Yellow-billed Cuckoo lingered for just two days. However, it showed well at times, resulting in some stunning photographs.

DAVID CAMPBELL



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Rarities: October 2014

Saving the best till last



Josh Jones reports on a month when most of the star birds arrived in the final week, whether from the east or west.

MARC READ



This confiding and very photogenic Steppe Grey Shrike was the first county record for Norfolk, making it very popular with local listers.

What felt like a fairly routine October actually looked quite fruitful on paper by the month's end. The boost came in the final couple of days, with Britain's third Eastern Crowned Warbler at Brotton, North Yorks (see pages 8-9). Found on 30th – the same date as the Hertfordshire bird of 2011 (see *Birdwatch* 234: 72-74), it turned out to be the most

co-operative of the three so far, lingering until 1 November and performing well at times in its chosen plantation.

One of the most remarkable records of the month was the female Siberian Thrush at Scousburgh, Mainland, Shetland, on 15th (see page 11). The bird was wearing a Norwegian ring and was quickly confirmed as the same

bird ringed at Husøy, Norway, on 24 September (see last month, pages 22-23). In a direct line, this is a 614-mile south-westerly journey, but the likelihood is that the bird was hiding out somewhere in Norway for a couple of weeks before making the North Sea crossing. Unfortunately it had moved on from Scousburgh by the following morning.

Though more or less annual these days, the arrival of a Siberian Rubythroat nevertheless sends shockwaves around the twitching community – particularly when it's a male, like the stunning adult found at Levenwick, Mainland, Shetland, on 3rd (see last month, pages 14-16). This bird lingered for six days, was widely twitched and paved the way for that age-old



STEVE ARLOW (WWW.BIRDERSPLAYGROUND.CO.UK)

Though a rare vagrant to Europe, Grey-cheeked Thrush's northerly breeding range and long-distance migration make it one of the more regular North American passerines to cross the Atlantic.



MARTIN BENSON

Distinctly rarer was this Hermit Thrush on North Uist, Outer Hebrides, which came on the back of Hurricane Gonzalo. It heralded the arrival of a slew of North American rarities.

question: when will we get a twitchable bird on the mainland?

Also from the east came three Isabelline Shrikes (in Kent, Norfolk and East Yorkshire) on 15-16th, five Red-flanked Bluetails including Ireland's fourth at Blacksod on the Mullet Peninsula, Co Mayo, from 28-30th, a White's Thrush on Fair Isle on 4th and a Lanceolated Warbler at Quendale, Mainland, Shetland, on 7-8th.

Booted out

The only Booted Warbler was a lingering moulting adult at Torness Power Station, Lothian, from 11-23rd, while an Arctic Warbler was at Donna Nook, Lincs, from 11-14th. An Eastern Bonelli's Warbler – the second of the year – arrived on Shetland, where it was present at Scalloway from 10-13th, and just like the Northumbrian bird in the spring (see *Birdwatch* 265: 16-18), was also initially identified as a Western Bonelli's.

One of Norfolk's October highlights was the presence of a confiding Steppe Grey Shrike at Burnham Norton from 5-16th. This represents the first county record of what has been an increasingly regular visitor to British shores in recent times – though this is the first since the Shropshire bird of 2011 (see *Birdwatch* 235: 70) – and is the 24th for Britain.

It's been several years since the last easily twitchable British Blyth's Pipit, and thus many were hoping for a long residency from the bird found on St Mary's, Scilly, on 5th. However, a combination of initial uncertainty over its identification and its five-day stay meant that the wait for another obliging individual looks set to go on. Generally more co-operative, the autumn's first Desert Wheatear was a male that arrived on Skomer, Pems, on 28th, though it had disappeared by the following morning.

There were a couple of pulses of Nearctic passerines in October, with the early highlight being a Scarlet Tanager at Brevig, Barra, from 6-9th (see last month, page 9). This first for the Outer Hebrides is also only the 11th for Britain and Ireland, and was well-twitched during its four-day stay. A large-billed individual, there was also debate over the identification with some stateside opinion favouring Summer Tanager

before it was confirmed as Scarlet.

The autumn's second Swainson's Thrush preceded the tanager on 4th, when a bird was found at Loop Head, Co Clare. It was seen again briefly the next day but continues the run of largely inaccessible individuals; for example, it's now been a decade since the last Scilly record. October's only Red-eyed Vireos were also seen at the beginning of the month, with one-dayers on Achill Island, Co Mayo, on 3rd and the second for Northumberland at Low Newton-by-the-Sea on 7th. The same weather conditions also produced Co Wexford's first Solitary Sandpiper, near Duncormick on 7th; the bird went on to linger there for more than a week.

The most dynamic period of the month came in conjunction with the arrival of the remnants of Hurricane Gonzalo, which quickly produced both Cornwall's second Bridled Tern past Pendeen on 21st and a Forster's Tern past nearby Cape Cornwall the following day. Excellent though these records were, they turned out not to be the real headliners in Gonzalo's aftermath.

A Hermit Thrush was the first significant arrival, hopping about in the dunes at Balranald, North Uist, Outer Hebrides, on 22nd, looking somewhat forlorn in the atrocious conditions. It was still there the following day and appeared altogether healthier in the improved weather, but had moved on by 24th. This is the third British Hermit Thrush within the space of a year, following last year's gettable bird at Porthgwarra and the Fair Isle bird this spring.

Save the date

The date of 23 October has forged a fearsome reputation for producing a series of extremely rare birds in recent years (2013's Cape May Warbler, for example), but the date was truly exceptional this year. First to break was the season's first Grey-cheeked Thrush, on Barra; this was followed half-an-hour later by a Yellow-billed Cuckoo at Porthgwarra, Cornwall. Both were upstaged within the hour as news of Britain's first Black-billed Cuckoo for 24 years broke on North Ronaldsay, Orkney (see page 12). Only the 15th for Britain and Ireland, it's been a long wait for another since



GRAHAM CATLEY

A long-distance migrant between its breeding range in northern Eurasian and South-East Asian wintering quarters, Arctic Warbler is an annual vagrant to Britain. This individual was at Donna Nook, Lincolnshire.



DAVID ABRAHAM

The only Booted Warbler of the month was found at Torness Power Station, Lothian. The species has been somewhat thin on the ground this autumn.



MICHAEL MCKEE

With just a handful of British records, Eastern Bonelli's Warbler is always an excellent find. But separation from the similar and more numerous – though still rare – Western Bonelli's can be tricky.

the heydays of the 1980s and, as it transpired, the wait would go on – the bird was seen for a matter of a few minutes before disappearing altogether.

Those searching for the Black-billed also found a Grey-cheeked Thrush on 'North Ron' late in the afternoon, by which point the Yellow-billed Cuckoo at Porthgarra had settled down a little and was showing well – making it the first of its kind to be twitchable since the St Levan bird in October 2000. At the opposite end of the country, news broke of a Chimney Swift at Loch Stiapabhat, Lewis, Outer Hebrides – the first British record since 2005 – which went on to show around there and Port Nis on and off throughout the following day and once again on 25th (see pages 8-9). The Yellow-billed also lingered throughout Friday 24th but had gone by Saturday morning.

Grey days

Another Grey-cheeked Thrush was found on Fair Isle on 24th, lingering until the next day; the autumn's fourth was then discovered on Fetlar, Shetland, on 29th.

Earlier in the month, Britain's

seventh Audouin's Gull had been photographed at Dungeness, Kent (see page 9). Seen on 12th, it was identified from photos later that evening but not noted again; it represents the third site record as well as the first autumn record for Britain – if you consider the Lincolnshire bird of August 2008 a summer occurrence.

The last Audouin's record came from Minsmere RSPB, Suffolk, and while the reserve didn't offer anything quite so rare this month, a Little Crake there from 4-13th (and apparently since 30 September) was nevertheless a welcome occurrence, particularly given that it was the first Suffolk record since a male at the same site in September 1973.

At sea, a Brünnich's Guillemot past Flamborough Head, East Yorks, on 13th closely follows last year's Filey bird (which has recently been accepted as a first for Yorkshire). Another excellent find was a drake Black Scoter at Lunan Bay, Angus, on 20th; it was still being seen there, albeit intermittently, at the end of the month.

A fantastic bird for the recently created

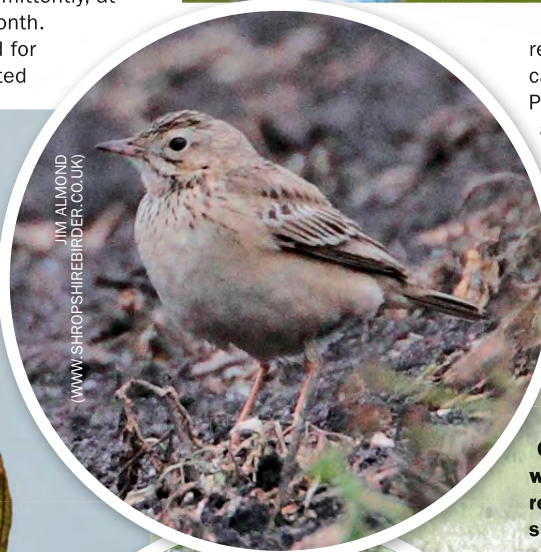
Red-flanked Bluetail numbers have been lower this year than some previous autumns, so this bird on Shetland was very welcome.



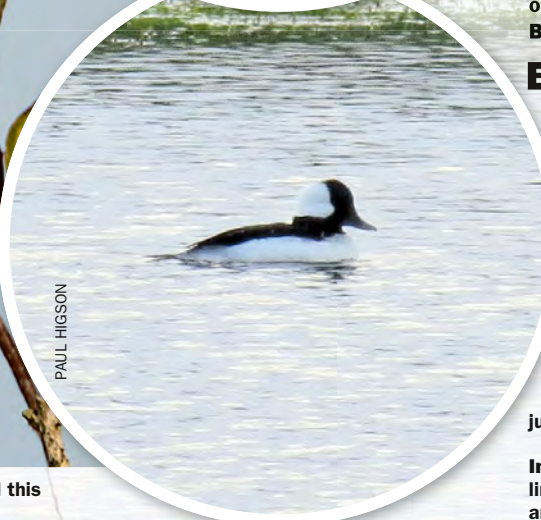
JOHN NADIN



Three Isabelline Shrikes reported during October included this first-winter individual at Warham Greens, Norfolk.



JIM ALMOND
(WWW.SHROPSHIREBIRDER.CO.UK)



PAUL HIGSON

reserve at Steart Marshes came in the form of a juvenile Pallid Harrier. Initially touted as a possible Northern

Harrier on 22nd, the correct identification was soon confirmed and the bird continued to perform well there at times into November. It followed at least two birds on Shetland early in the month. ■

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BIRDBUIDES 

Inset top: a very rare vagrant to Britain, a long-staying Blyth's Pipit is surely on many birders' wishlists. Unfortunately, this individual wasn't to oblige, being seen by just a lucky few on Scilly.

Inset below: this Bufflehead lingered on Orkney into November and was the first local record.

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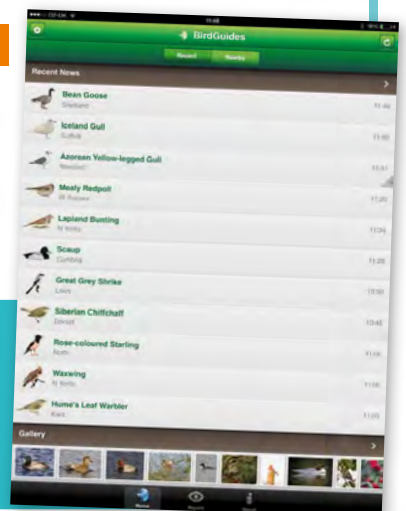
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Scarcities: October 2014

The prodigal birds return

Josh Jones reports on a month where there were several notable influxes, including a number of species that have been scarcer in recent times.



No longer an official rarity, Olive-backed Pipit is still a great find at any site, and this showy bird at Sunderland, Co Durham, was appropriately well watched over its week-long stay from 17th.

FRANK GOLDING

October represents the peak of autumn migration across Britain and Ireland, as the greatest number and variety of species make their way to, from and through our islands. Indeed, the month is perhaps epitomised no better than by the arrival of large numbers of thrushes, first Redwings and later Fieldfares.

As it happened, the latter species at least appeared very

late, with the first significant arrivals not until 30th, when thousands of thrushes appeared on the east coast between Suffolk and Northumberland; the

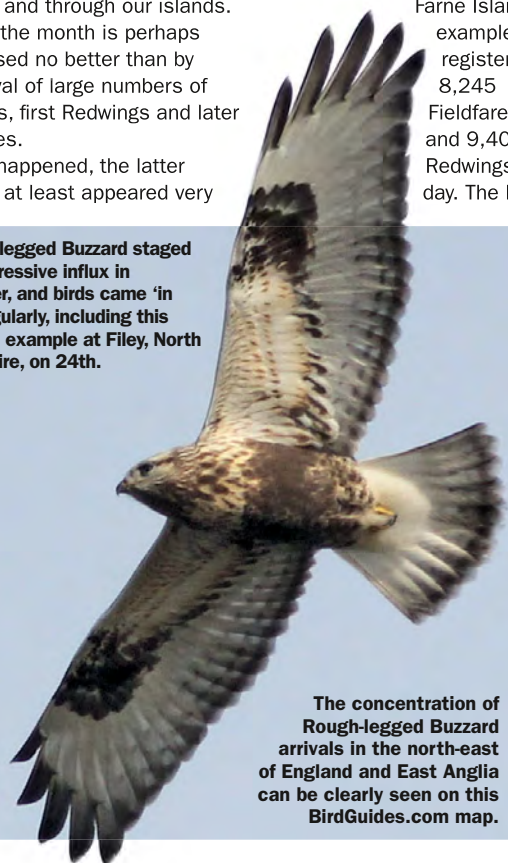
Farne Islands, for example, registered 8,245 Fieldfares and 9,407 Redwings that day. The latter

had appeared in good numbers earlier in the month, although were perhaps still a little on the late side.

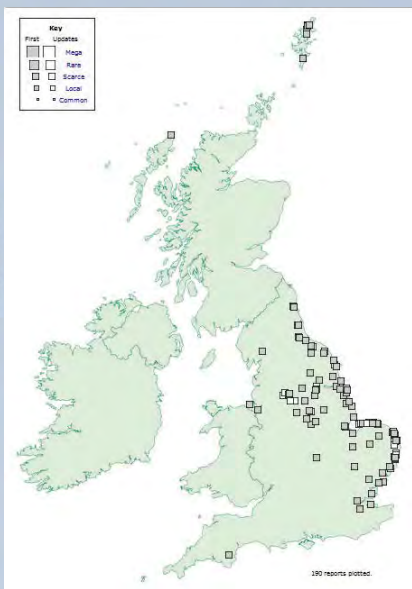
The first big Redwing push occurred mid-month in conjunction with a quite spectacular arrival of migrant Ring Ouzels, the bulk of which passed through on 13-14th. On the former date, counts included an impressive 105 on Blakeney Point, Norfolk, but Kent became the most profligate on

14th, with Dungeness registering an astonishing minimum of 550 birds. Several other three-figure counts were made around the county, with the 250 seen flying out to sea at South Foreland late afternoon, presumably forming an incredible sight. Counts were considerably smaller from neighbouring counties, though flocks of double figures were seen as far away as Suffolk. Such voluminous arrivals are far from commonplace in Britain, although something very similar took place in the South-East from 11-13 October 2013, when peak totals included 390 at Beachy Head, East Sussex.

Rough-legged Buzzard staged an impressive influx in October, and birds came 'in off' regularly, including this classic example at Filey, North Yorkshire, on 24th.



The concentration of Rough-legged Buzzard arrivals in the north-east of England and East Anglia can be clearly seen on this BirdGuides.com map.



Rough influx

One species that hasn't appeared on British shores in good numbers for many years is Rough-legged Buzzard, and thus an influx during the second half of October was welcome (see pages 45-52 for an ID photo guide to this species and Common Buzzard). This year's reports were at the highest level this century, with birds widespread along the east coast between Kent and Northumberland, though most numerous between Norfolk and Yorkshire. Peaks included an impressive four together on the marshes adjacent to

MARK PEARSON

Great Grey Shrikes began arriving on their traditional wintering grounds during the month. This migrant bird chose to pitch up in the photographer's garden at Beachy Head, East Sussex, the fourth recorded there.



ROGER CHARLWOOD

Breydon Water, Norfolk, while several sites hosted twos. Birds also penetrated inland at sites in Nottinghamshire, Northamptonshire and Cambridgeshire, and it seems likely that numbers will increase further into the autumn.

Great Grey Shrikes also began to arrive at their traditional wintering sites: Thursley Common, Surrey, Crabtree Hill, Glos, and the New Forest, Hants,

all had individuals by the end of the month. Prior to this, a notable arrival occurred along the east coast from 13th, with the Spurn, East Yorkshire, area claiming an impressive six birds on 15th. Shore Larks also began to appear, with the most notable a record of two from Wool Law, Clyde, on 29th; if accepted, this will be the first county record.

But it was not just quantity of migrants that stole the show

in October – some fantastic local records also reached the headlines. Though a familiar and increasing species in southern England, Cetti's Warbler becomes much rarer the further north you go, despite the species' recent northward range expansion. Therefore Scotland's second (and first live) Cetti's was a record to celebrate, even more so for its wayward choice of location on Barra, Outer Hebrides, on 14th. The last report was a bird found dead in Lothian in October 1993, and thus the wait for an accessible bird north of the border goes on.

Characteristic October 'sub-rares' included a reasonable total of 15 Radde's Warblers, the first of which was at Sumburgh, Shetland, on 6th, and was followed a week later by a bulk arrival over 12-14th that included four in Norfolk. In contrast just three Dusky Warblers were reported: in Norfolk and Kent on 15th and then on the Farne Islands, Northumbria, from 30th. Pallas's Warbler numbers struggled into the 20s after the first two arrived at Donna Nook, Lincs, on 13th; the only other counts of more than one involved braces at Holme on 15th and Wells, on 16th, both Norfolk.

It proved another great autumn for Olive-backed Pipits, with a peak day count of three on Fair Isle on 18th topping a month that saw at least 30 nationwide. Numerous confiding mainland birds were well twitched, none more so than a particularly tame individual in scrub adjacent to a Sunderland petrol station from 17-22nd. Counts of two came from North Ronaldsay, Orkney,

and three localities on the Shetland mainland.

Nearctic shorebirds were again scarce after a quiet September, though a dozen American Golden Plovers included a particularly confiding juvenile at Davidstow Airfield, Cornwall, from 15-31st. White-rumped Sandpipers were remarkably scarce, with just three reported all month, while a Semipalmated Sandpiper on Achill Island, Co Mayo, on 3rd was only the second record of the autumn – incredible given how numerous this species has been in recent years. It was similarly bleak for Buff-breasted Sandpipers, with just three reported.

Diminishing returns

A Kentish Plover was a surprising find at Crymlyn Burrows, Glamorgan, from 18-20th. The first county record since a very brief visitor to Whiteford Point in May 2010, it was a county tick for many and represents an unusual October record of a species ever scarcer on British shores.

Similarly unseasonal was an adult White-winged Black Tern, still sporting much of its summer dress at Rye Harbour, East Sussex, from 18th until the end of the month. A little more expected are returning Ring-billed Gulls, and it was good to see the adult back at Gosport, Hants, from 26th – recent return dates have included 23 October 2011, 21 October 2012 and 3 November 2013, so this October's date is entirely typical. First-winters were new at Rubha Ardvule, South Uist, Outer Hebrides, on 22nd and Kilkee, Co Clare, on 25th.



PERRY FAIRMAN

A juvenile Red-backed Shrike at Lowestoft, Suffolk, lingered from late September into November, often giving intimate views of its ablutions as it preened, drank and bathed in puddles in the car park of a Birds Eye factory.



GIDEON KNIGHT

Lapland Bunting is always a good inland find, and the surprising urban hot-spot of Wanstead Flats, Gtr London, was the venue for this confiding individual for two days mid-month.

The dozen American Golden Plovers that showed up during the month included this bird at Davidstow Airfield, Cornwall, from 15th to 31st.

CHRISTOPHER UPSON



Stormy weather

Though Hurricane Gonzalo failed to deliver any big influx of Nearctic birds, it did produce some of the best seawatching of the autumn on 21st. A session off Pendeen which also produced the Bridled Tern (see page 15) saw 420 Balearic Shearwaters, 260 Great Skuas and several Grey Phalaropes pass through during a day of impressive variety and number. Nearby St Ives also did well, with 50 Pomarine and 305 Great Skuas, as well as more than 400 Balearic Shearwaters and numerous Leach's Storm-petrels. Kilcummin Head, Co Mayo, did most spectacularly for

Grey Phalaropes (62) and Pomarine Skuas (92), with fair tallies for a wide range of other notable species.

A typical spread of returning wildfowl included Richardson's Cackling Geese back with the Barnacle Goose flocks in Co Sligo and on Islay, Argyll, in addition to a bird on Barra, Outer Hebrides, on 15th. Islay also welcomed back both Todd's and Lesser Canada Geese, though a *parvipes*-type with the Pink-footed Geese at Holkham Freshmarsh, Norfolk, on 23rd was a bird not seen in recent winters. Black Brants had also returned to familiar locations in East Yorkshire, Essex, Hampshire and Dorset

by the end of the month; Snow Geese included two back in Aberdeenshire and one in Perth and Kinross.

Ring-necked Ducks included a popular female at Drift Reservoir, Cornwall, from 13th, and two first-winters seen alongside a Lesser Scaup on Tiree, Argyll. Another young Lesser Scaup arrived at Rahasane Turlough, Co Galway, on 12th, but the most striking report concerned a red nasal-saddled drake at Llangorse Lake, Powys – first reported on 18th, it had already been present for the best part of two weeks, though the origins of its 'bling' are as yet unknown.

American Wigeon have proven pretty rare in recent winters and thus double figures during

October were welcome; many were returning drakes among Eurasian Wigeon, although a pair arrived on Tresco, Scilly, off the back of Gonzalo on 23rd and lingered until the end of the month. A drake Green-winged Teal also shared Great Pool with the wigeon and was one of 10 or so seen – others included a drake back at Caerlaverock, Dumfries and Galloway. ■

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BIRDBUIDES



MARK HIPKIN

Kentish Plover has become a near-rarity in recent years with the few sightings often restricted to southern England, so this bird at Crymlyn Burrows, Glamorgan, from 18-20th was something of a surprise.

JIM ALMOND (www.shropshirebirders.co.uk)



Above: this drake (left) and duck American Wigeon frequented the Great Pool on Tresco, Scilly, on 24th and were part of a welcome double-figure upturn in records, the species having been a bit thin on the ground in recent years.

Right: a particularly photogenic male Red-breasted Flycatcher entertained visitors to Beachy Head, East Sussex, from 22-28th, often giving birders dream views.



DAVID MERCER

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Western Palearctic: October 2014

Yank fest on the Azores

The region's premier hot-spot produced the goods, says **Josh Jones**, but there were plenty of other megas during October too.



This first-winter Great Grey Shrike of the American subspecies *borealis* on Corvo, Azores, on 18th was the first occurrence of the form in the region, and accordingly proved popular among the annual visiting birders.

October sees many keen WP birders' eyes turn towards the Azores for the now-annual 'vagrant fest' across the archipelago. The rarest bird of the month came on 18th when a first-winter Northern Shrike (Great Grey Shrike of the form *borealis*) was discovered on Corvo. Linger there until the end of the month, the bird was often to be heard singing and represents the first regional record of this Nearctic form, considered a good split by

numerous authorities.

The main island of São Miguel also scored heavily with a 'Western' Willet present at Ponta Delgada throughout the month, having initially been seen on 25 September – the 14th record for the Western Palearctic and the second in the Azores since 2009, but



the first to be truly twitchable.

Corvo's fifth Black-throated Green Warbler arrived on 19th and remained for several days, with what was presumably Flores's Snowy Owl relocating there from 5-7th. Other Nearctic landbirds on the island included Chimney

Despite lingering doubts over its provenance due to wear on its feathers and claws, this White-crowned Black Wheatear drew many to Oegsteest, The Netherlands, from 6th.

The third in the archipelago since 2009, this Willet at Ponta Delgada, São Miguel, Azores, from 25 September into November was the first to be twitchable. It is of the western form *inornata*, a potential split.



ARNOLD VAN DEN BERG



A first-winter Black-throated Green Warbler at Poço de Agua, Corvo, Azores, on 24th was one of several choice American wood-warblers seen on the islands during the month.

VINCENT LEGRAND

DAVID MONTICELLI

DOMINIC MITCHELL (WWW.BIRDDINGETC.COM)



Left: an Oriental Turtle Dove of the form meena frequented stubble fields with Collared Doves in Romania, at Pál Lajos, Marton Attila, Dósa Attila, on 30th; another was in Norway earlier in the month.

JOZSEF SZABO



Inset left: this Scarlet Tanager on Corvo was one of four separate individuals seen on the Azores.

Among the more expected North American vagrants on the Azores in October, this Bobolink was on Flores on 11th.

DAVID MONTICELLI



DOMINIC MITCHELL (WWW.BIRDBINGETC.COM)

Swift, two Cliff Swallows, Blackpoll Warbler, at least three Black-and-white Warblers, two Northern Parulas, Common Yellowthroat, Philadelphia and at least a dozen Red-eyed Vireos, two Yellow-billed Cuckoos, two Rose-breasted Grosbeaks, four Scarlet Tanagers, Bobolink and two Indigo Buntings, plus a couple of confiding Wilson's Snipe and – all the way from Europe – the Azores' fourth Spotted Flycatcher. A quieter affair on Flores nevertheless saw Bobolink and Scarlet Tanager recorded, while a Red-eyed Vireo was on Terceira on 17th.

In France, a first-winter Chestnut Bunting on Ouessant, Finistère, on 24-25th was a fantastic discovery and follows a record from nearby Sein Island in mid-October 2009 (and another in Norway in October 2010). This emerging pattern of autumn records strongly suggests the species is making it to western Europe under its own steam, and presumably a 'good' British occurrence isn't far away. Sein Island had a Grey-cheeked Thrush on 22nd but it was found dead the following day.

Norway's first Red-eyed Vireo was a great find at Kvitsøy, Rogaland, on 2nd. A Brown



JOHN EDWARDS

Isabelline Shrike was an entirely unexpected find for a holidaying reader on 31st at S'Albufera National Park, Mallorca, Spain. If accepted, it will constitute the first Balearic Islands record and the sixth for Spain.

Shrike was on Utsira on 2nd, remarkably following the island's first in 2005 by exactly nine years, while an Oriental Turtle Dove was at Alshus, Østfold, on 20th. The first Lanceolated Warbler for the Faroe Islands was at Svínøi on 1st; this was perhaps a little surprising even allowing for a lack of coverage.

Blåvand, Denmark, is rapidly cementing its reputation as one of the best sites for scoter-watching in the 'WP' with Stejneger's, American White-winged and two Black Scoters being seen among the Common and Velvet flocks there mid-month. All it needs now is a Surf! More exciting on a national scale was the first Danish Eyebrowed Thrush, trapped at Gedser Bird Observatory, Falster, on 18th.

In The Netherlands, a White-crowned Black Wheatear in the centre of Oegsteest, Zuid-Holland, from 6th will represent the first national record if accepted. There have been concerns about the unusual choice of location and bird's poor condition, but there was a similar autumn record from Germany from August-October 2010. The Dutch bird was still present to the month's end, while other significant records included a Black-winged Kite at Cromstrijen on 17th and a Spanish Sparrow at Maavslakte on 26th, the latter presumably ship assisted.

In Germany there was a Brown Shrike in Nordrhein-Westfalen from 14-16th, but the bird was only correctly identified after the event. In the same state, a Little Bustard was at Dingdener Heide on 26-27th at least. Still a mega bird in the WP, neighbouring Poland scored its first Yellow-browed Bunting, trapped at Dakowice, West Pomerania, on 5th; the same site then boasted Poland's third Iberian Chiffchaff on 11th. A Black Scoter was at Wladyslawowo on 18th.

A couple of other national firsts came in the form of a Lesser Short-toed Lark in Romania, present in the Danube Delta on 15th and, in Cyprus, a Striated Heron at Zakaki from 23rd. ■



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STEINER 
G E R M A N Y

Where
to watch
birds

- 1** Exe Estuary, coast and heaths, Devon. Pages 25-27
- 2** Titchfield Haven NNR, Hampshire. Page 28
- 3** Cannock Chase and Chasewater, Staffordshire. Page 29
- 4** Largo Bay and Ruddons Point, Fife. Page 30

MORE DECEMBER SITES

- Alnmouth to Lindisfarne, Northumberland: bit.ly/bw258AlnmouthLindisfarne
- The Ayrshire coast: bit.ly/bw258AyrshireCoast
- Belvide Reservoir, Staffordshire: bit.ly/bw258BelvideRes
- Cloonlaughnan and Funshinagh Turloughs, Co Roscommon: bit.ly/bw258CloonlaughnanFunshinagh
- The Dee Estuary, Cheshire: bit.ly/bw246DeeEstuary
- Findhorn and Burghhead Bays, Moray: bit.ly/bw234FindhornBurghheadBays
- Llys-y-frân Reservoir, Pembrokeshire: bit.ly/bw246Llys-y-frânRes
- Pagham Harbour, West Sussex: bit.ly/bw246PaghamHarbour
- Riverside CP, Kent: bit.ly/bw258RiversideCP



1 SITE OF THE MONTH

EXE ESTUARY, COAST AND HEATHS

The mosaic of habitats at this east Devon site provide homes for a variety of wintering birds, making it an ideal December destination, says **Chris Townend**.

Finish your day at Colaton Raleigh Common for possible views of the elusive and declining Dartford Warbler.



BILL BASTON (WWW.BILLBASTON.COM)

With the autumn behind us and thoughts of those mouthwatering Sibes and Yanks a distant memory, now is the time to get stuck into some good wholesome winter birding!

This itinerary covers a mixture of estuary, sea and heathland habitats in east Devon, focusing on the region's most important estuary for wintering birds, the Exe. It also covers a couple of lesser-known sites near the lovely seaside town of Budleigh Salterton: the Otter Estuary and Colaton Raleigh Common.

You could experience impressive

swirling flocks of waders, ducks and grunting **Brent Geese**, small groups of seaduck and divers, a chance of a white-winged gull or rarity and a grand finale of **Dartford Warbler**, raptors and maybe a **Great Grey Shrike**. If you do really well, you could even reward yourself with a cream tea!

Timing and state of tide are crucial for birding the Exe, so ensure you check before planning your visit. A mid-morning high tide is required to complete this route. Generally, the higher tide the more impressive the roosting birds.

USEFUL CONTACTS

Travel information and timetables

- **Traveline:** 0871 200 2233 or www.traveline.info.
- **Traveline Scotland:** 0871 200 2233 or www.travelinescotland.com.
- **Traveline Cymru:** 0871 200 2233 or www.traveline-cymru.info

- **Stagecoach Bus:** www.stagecoachbus.com.
- **Arriva Bus:** 0844 800 4411 or www.arrivabus.co.uk.
- **National Rail:** 0845 748 4950 or www.nationalrail.com.

National bird news
BirdGuides.com: for all bird news

and to report your own sightings, call 0333 577 2473, email sightings@birdguides.com or visit www.birdguides.com.

Mapping

Access fully interactive and annotated Google maps for all these itineraries at bit.ly/BWMaps.

Further information

- **County bird recorders:** www.bto.org/volunteer-surveys/birdtrack/bird-recording/county-bird-recorders.
- **Birdwatch Bookshop:** for discounted birding books see www.birdwatch.co.uk/store.



JIM ALMOND (WWW.SHROPSHIREBIRDER.CO.UK)

Check the muddy creek at the Otter Estuary carefully as it has previously held Grey Phalarope.

Early start

Start your day at least two hours before high tide overlooking the Exe and the lower reaches of the River Clyst ❶, scanning for waders and wildfowl from the designated viewing platform (SX 972873). Spend the first 30 minutes sifting through a selection of waders and gulls.

Overwintering **Common Sandpipers** are often feeding just below the platform, while scanning further out should reveal **Red-breasted Merganser**. The platform can be found just 350 m south of the Bowling Green Marsh RSPB hide (SX 971875) along a gravel track adjacent to the road.

Return to the hide and simply sit back, relax, sip your coffee and wait for the impressive flocks of birds to arrive. The stars of the show here are without doubt the constant flutter of black-and-white wings as hundreds of **Black-tailed Godwits** and **Avocets** arrive to roost on the marsh.

Among the many wader species present, carefully check the flocks for **Spotted Redshank**, **Greenshank** and **European Golden Plover**. Ducks are also well represented, with a chance of a **Long-tailed Duck**. Keep an eye out for the hunting **Peregrine Falcons** that often cause chaos and scatter the roosting birds.

With the tide now at its peak, it is time

to take the 20-minute drive to Exmouth at the southern end of the Exe Estuary at Mudbank Lane (SY 000820). Much of the wildfowl of the estuary gathers here, with impressive flocks of **Northern Pintail** and **Eurasian Wigeon** among numbers of noisy Brent Geese.

A stroll north up the shared cycle path for 200 m gives another view across

the estuary, and with the tide quickly retreating, waders should be more apparent. Scan among the commoner species for **Red-breasted Merganser**, **Common Goldeneye** and **Grey Plover**.

A short walk or drive to the Imperial Recreation Ground (SX 996811) ❷ gives a different perspective of the estuary and a few picnic benches to scan from. Brent Geese often give exceptionally close views from here and it is always worth checking any loafing gulls on the adjacent fields for **Mediterranean**. Further scanning of the estuary should reveal any missing species and, as sand banks begin to appear with the dropping tide, a good scan of the loafing gulls is compulsory, with both **Iceland** and **Glaucous Gulls** having been recorded in good years.

Time is ticking and by around midday you need to be heading towards Exmouth seafront. Take the seafront road and park close to the lifeboat station (SY 011799) which overlooks Maer Rocks ❸. A scan over the sea towards Dawlish Warren may reveal **Slavonian Grebe** and hopefully the wintering **Common Scoter** flock. Check carefully for **Velvet**, as well as **Surf Scoter** which has been regular in recent winters.

Purple patch

Maer Rocks are worth checking for **Purple Sandpiper** – and don't ignore the gulls! **Iceland**, **Glaucous**, **Kumlien's** and **Bonaparte's Gulls** have all been recorded here. Before moving on to



ARIE OUVKERK (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

Large flocks of noisy Brent Geese make their home on the Exe Estuary during the winter.



nearby Budleigh Salterton, walk to Maer Road car park (SY 010801) and check the scrub, where you should find **Common Chiffchaff**, while **Siberian Chiffchaff** or even **Yellow-browed Warbler** are both possible.

In the picturesque town of Budleigh Salterton, head through the high street, trying to resist the urge for a cream tea at The Cosy Teapot tearooms, and park at Lime Kiln car park (SY 072820) **4**.

A scan out to sea from here is always worthwhile, with **Common Eider**, Common Scoter and **Red-throated** and **Great Northern Divers** all possible. Also check the beach and associated huts for **Black Redstart**.

Take the path along the raised shingle ridge to the mouth of the Otter Estuary, where **Rock Pipit** should be easily found. Scan up the estuary for wintering Common Sandpiper. Gulls once again feature highly, with a good chance of Mediterranean Gull and maybe a 'white-winger'. The site also has a good history of rarer gulls, with both Bonaparte's and American Herring Gulls having been recorded here. Check the muddy creek below the shingle ridge as both **Snow Bunting** and **Grey Phalarope** have occurred in the past.

On the water

Take a 200 m walk north from the car park between the cricket pitch and the western edge of the estuary. Check the former for **Water Pipit** and waders. You will soon arrive at a hide and some flooded fields, where waders, gulls and duck flocks gather. Wintering Glossy Ibis has occurred here on at least two occasions and Green-winged Teal has also been recorded. A further 200 m and you will arrive at White Bridge. Listen for



Head to the hide at Bowling Green Marsh RSPB for the impressive sight of hundreds of Black-winged Godwits and Avocets.

DAVID KJAER (WWW.DAVIDKJAER.COM)

the contact call of **Cetti's Warbler** that often show well just before the bridge; look below the bridge for **Water Rail**.

You need to ensure you are on Colaton Raleigh Common **5** for the last hour of daylight; it is a 15-minute drive from Budleigh Salterton. Park at the Warren car park (SY 040880) and then walk south-east for 700-800 m along one of the many tracks until you reach a point (SY 047877) which overlooks the Grenade Range building and flagpoles which define the firing range.

Wrap up warm and spend the last

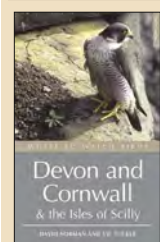
hour scanning the entire heathland, and do stay until dusk! **Merlin** can often be seen hunting **Meadow Pipits** at dusk and Dartford Warblers are often surprisingly vocal at this time of day and can often be located nearby.

Hen Harrier is irregular, though one or two birds have wintered in recent years, and Great Grey Shrike has been seen around the grenade range during the last two winters. Flocks of **Fieldfare** often gather to roost and if you wait until the last glimmer of light, you may get lucky with a flying **Woodcock**. ■



VISITOR INFORMATION

READS



Where to Watch Birds in Devon and Cornwall by David Norman and Vic Tucker (Christopher Helm, £18.99) – order from £16.99 on page 77.

> Sites and access

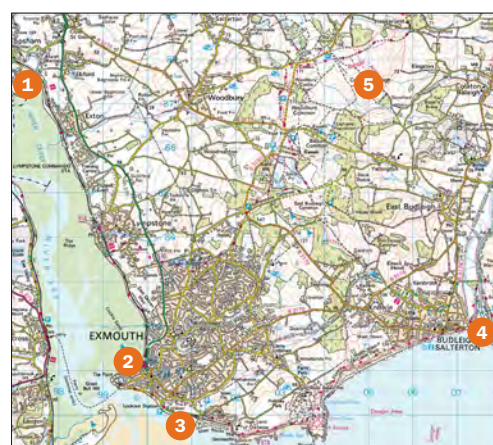
There is free public access to all sites, but many of the car parks are pay and display. There are train stations in Topsham for Bowling Green Marsh RSPB and Exmouth for Mudbank Lane and Imperial Recreation Ground. First Group runs bus services in the area; call 01752 967800 or visit www.firstgroup.com/ukbus/devon_cornwall. The hide at Bowling Green Marsh RSPB is fully wheelchair accessible.

> Maps

Ordnance Survey Explorers 114 and 115, Landranger 192.

> Web resources

- www.devonbirds.org for site information and recent sightings.
- www.explored Devon.info/activities/cycle/exe-estuary-trail for more information on the Exe Estuary trail.
- bit.ly/bw270ExeEstuaryLeaflet for a downloadable PDF containing information and a map of the Exe Estuary.



See bit.ly/BWMaps for links to the fully annotated Google maps.

ORDNANCE SURVEY MAPPING © CROWN COPYRIGHT. AM45/10



2 TITCHFIELD HAVEN NNR

By David Wallace

Where and why

Titchfield Haven NNR, managed by Hampshire County Council, covers 369 acres of the Meon Valley with a range of natural habitat including river, reedbeds, meadows and fen. There are eight hides and a good variety of birds can be seen at relatively close quarters in a compact area.

Route planner

Start at the visitor centre (SU 534023) ① and make your way west towards the Meon Shore. Check behind the sailing club for waders and gulls. **Ringed Plover**, **Oystercatcher** and **Dunlin** are usually present, along with all the common gulls, including small numbers of **Mediterranean**. Scan the river from the narrow road bridge by the visitor centre for **Little Grebe**, **Tufted Duck** and **Pochard**.

Follow the road round to the Meon Shore and look out to sea for **Great Crested** and perhaps a **Slavonian Grebe**, and if you are very lucky a **Red-necked Grebe**. **Dark-bellied Brent Geese** winter in the area and one or two **Pale-bellied** birds are sometimes seen among the flock.

Great Northern Diver is possible, as are **Common Eider** and **Red-breasted Merganser**. **Common Scoter** is often present, and last winter two Velvet Scoters lingered offshore for some time. At high tide small flocks of **Sanderling** and **Turnstone** roost on the spit behind the sailing club. This is a good spot for a confiding **Rock Pipit**.

Continue to the reserve's western entrance (SU 532024) ②. This is the best location for



The western side of the reserve is the best location for Bearded Tit, which is increasingly difficult to catch up with in Britain due to a declining population.

MENNO VAN DUJIN (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

Bearded Tit, while **European Stonechat** is also present. On this side the Scrapes Trail involves a 1.3 mile return walk and includes four hides. Head first to the Meon Shore hide, which looks out over the South Scrape. **Gadwall**, **Eurasian Teal** and **Northern Shoveler** should be present, together with **Northern Lapwing**, **Common Redshank** and **Black-tailed Godwit**. Check the last carefully for the occasional **Bar-tailed Godwit**.

Turning right from the hide, continue along the Scrapes Trail to Pumfrett Hide ③, which overlooks the North Scrape. **Shelduck** and **Common Snipe** can be seen, with perhaps the odd wintering **Avocet**. Continue north to the Spurgin Hide ④, which looks out on Eleven Acre Mere. **Jack Snipe** has been seen here, so check the boggy areas carefully.

Retrace your steps to the back of the visitor centre and enter Cottage Hide, where you are likely

to see **Reed Bunting**, along with more common passerines. Follow the signs to the eastern side of the reserve, where the Boardwalk Trail provides a one-mile return walk meandering through wooded marshland. **Goldcrest** (and occasionally **Firecrest**) and **Great Spotted** and **Green Woodpeckers** are likely, with the possibility of **Coal Tit** and **Siskin**. Check the gardens on the right-hand side for **Redwing** and **Fieldfare**.

Turn left towards Suffern Hide, which overlooks the River Meon. ⑤ A **Kingfisher** is often present on one of the posts; this is the best hide for **Water Rail**.

Continue past the Walkway Pond to Meadow Hide, which gives panoramic views over the meadows. Three species of goose are usually present: **Canada**, four feral **Barnacles** and one or two **Greylags**. Scan Duck Bay for large numbers of **Eurasian Wigeon** and perhaps **Northern Pintail**.

Make your way north to Knights Bank Hide ⑥, which gives closer views of the area of water known as the Frying Pan. Look for **Cormorant**, **Grey Heron** and **Little Egret**, with the outside chance of a wintering **Bittern** flying over the reedbeds. **Eurasian Curlew** should be in the fields.

Scan north for flocks of overflying **European Golden Plover** and, as the light begins to fade, **Barn Owl** may sometimes be seen hunting over the water meadows close to the canal path. Finally, make your way back to the visitor centre and car park. ■

i VISITOR INFORMATION

READS



- *Where to Watch Birds in Dorset, Hampshire and the Isle of Wight* by George Green and Martin Cade (fourth edition, Christopher Helm, £18.99) – order from £16.99 on page 77.
- *Titchfield Haven Birds Day by Day* compiled by Barry Duffin (available at the visitor centre for £9.99).

► Sites and access

The reserve and visitor centre are open daily from 9.30 am–4 pm. Entry costs £3.90. The nearest train station is three miles away at Fareham. The number 21 bus stops at Solent Road by the Osborne View pub, just a short walk away (call 0871 200 2233 or visit www.firstgroup.com). All hides are accessible to wheelchair users or pushchairs.

► Maps

Ordnance Survey Explorer 119 and Landranger 196.

► Web resources

- www.hants.gov.uk/countryside/titchfield for site information.
- www.goingbirding.co.uk/hants for local sightings.
- @titchfieldhaven is the Twitter account for the reserve.



See bit.ly/BWMaps for links to fully annotated Google maps



3

CANNOCK CHASE AND CHASEWATER CP

By Lee Chapman

Where and why

Cannock Chase is located in Staffordshire between Cannock and Stafford. It is Britain's smallest Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, but what it lacks in size it makes up for in variety. A multitude of paths and trails lead through a mixture of ancient woodland, heathland, hawthorn scrub, pine forest and grassland, providing habitat for wintering thrushes, passerines and raptors. Nearby Chasewater CP is situated between Burntwood and Brownhills. It is one of the largest reservoirs in Staffordshire and a designated SSSI. Its vast expanse of water makes it the ideal roosting spot for thousands of wintering gulls.

Route planner

This short route takes you away from the major visitor centres which can get busy at weekends. An early start is recommended for the best chance of seeing scarce birds.

From Rugeley town centre briefly head north on the A460 before taking a left onto Hagley Road (signposted Cannock Chase). Follow this road and continue straight onto Penkridge Bank Road for about three miles. Shortly after passing the Takeroo campsite you will reach a bend in the road: look for a right turn here onto a bumpy dirt track, and follow this track until you reach a car park (SJ 998172).

Walk through the car park and join the path which takes you right, around the Cadet Hut **1**. It's worth pausing here to search for overwintering **Redwing** and

Chasewater CP is occasionally home to a wintering Slavonian Grebe.



Fieldfare, which may turn up anywhere along this route. Look out for corvids, listening carefully for the echoing croak of a **Raven**. Continue along this path for about half a mile. Scan the mixed finch and tit flocks, which occasionally may hold **Willow Tit**. Several **Bramblings** winter here.

At the end of the path you will reach a trig point (SJ 993180) **2**. On a calm day a **Great Grey Shrike** may be perched in one of the dead trees; there is also a good population of **European Stonechat** nearby.

Head right down a steep slope, looking out for **Green Woodpecker**. Take the second left off this path into Abrahams Valley (SJ 999186) and carefully search the Larch trees for flocks of **Common Crossbill**, which should always be checked for the possibility of rarer species.

You should also find **Goldcrest**, **Treecreeper**, **Coal Tit** and **Nuthatch**.

Double back, taking a right towards the trig point, but swinging left before you reach it. This track will take you back towards the car park, past a well-hidden bird feeder, located only by following the noisy flock of passerines. As you continue, take time to explore the old rifle range (SJ 998178), where you will probably see **Kestrel**, **Common Buzzard** or possibly the elusive **Goshawk** which is occasionally seen nearby.

On returning to the car park, the hawthorn scrub along Kingsley Wood Road is well worth close inspection, as **Brambling**, **Bullfinch** and **Yellowhammer** are often seen there.

Approximately eight miles away, just off the A5 (Watling Street) out of Cannock you will find the

well-signposted Chasewater CP (SK 039070) **3**. By far the best time to visit is at dusk, when you can witness around 20,000 gulls coming in to roost, including large numbers of **Black-headed** and **Lesser Black-backed Gulls**. Recent years have also provided reliable sightings of **Glaucous**, **Iceland**, **Caspian** and **Mediterranean Gulls**. You will not need to walk far from the car park to get a good view. Gulls usually face into the wind, so paying careful attention to this will indicate the best place to stand and scan.

Little and **Great Crested Grebes** are common here and **Goosander** are regular winter visitors. Other species such as **Black-necked** and **Slavonian Grebes** and **Great Northern Diver** are known to drop in on occasion. Last winter a Glossy Ibis also roosted here most evenings. ■



VISITOR INFORMATION

READS



Where to Watch Birds in the West Midlands by Frank Gribble, Graham Harrison, Helen Griffiths, Jim Winsper and Steve Coney (third edition, Christopher Helm, £18.99) – order from £16.99 on page 77.

> Sites and access

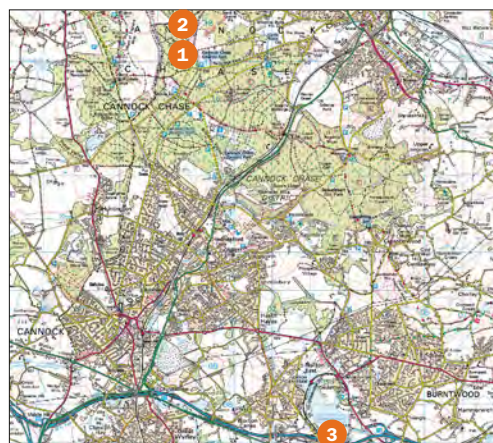
Access and car parking are free at Cannock Chase. The site is open 24 hours, but the main car parks are usually locked at dusk. The main paths are suitable for disabled access but there are some moderate climbs and the smaller paths can get muddy in winter. The Innovation Centre on Pool Road (SK 039070) has ample car parking and the paths are suitable for all users. There are train stations at Cannock, Hednesford and Rugeley. Arriva Midlands runs local bus services; see www.travelinemidlands.co.uk.

> Maps

Ordnance Survey Explorer 244 and Landranger 127.

> Web resources

- www.visitcannockchase.co.uk for information on Cannock Chase and nearby amenities.
- www.staffordshirebirding.blogspot.co.uk for local bird news.
- www.staffs-wildlife.org.uk for information on local wildlife trust reserves.



See bit.ly/BWMaps for links to fully annotated Google maps

4 LARGO BAY AND RUDDONS POINT

By David Heeley

Where and why

The broad sweep of Largo Bay is a major feature of the southern coast of Fife, lying on the boundary between the inner and outer Firth of Forth. The bay holds significant numbers of scoters, divers and grebes. The rocky headlands offer excellent seawatching and provide stopping-off points for uncommon and rare migrants in both spring and autumn.

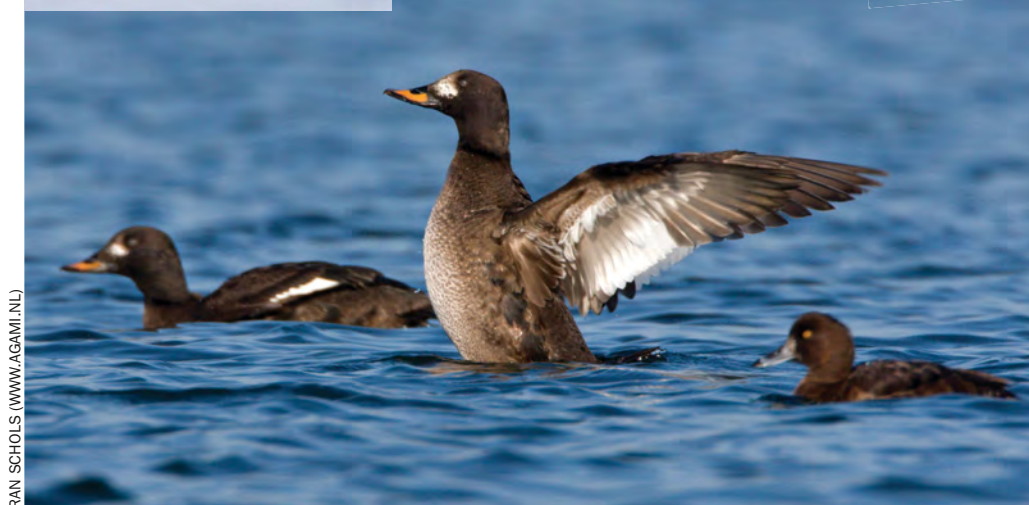
Route planner

Despite the size of the bay, car access to the shore is limited to just one or two locations. From the A915 look for Durham Wynd (NO 418030) which leads to the village of Lower Largo. Follow the narrow streets east to the free car park and toilets (NO 422026) ①.

In winter the bay holds a good population of **Slavonian** and **Great Crested Grebes**. **Red-necked Grebe** is regularly seen in small numbers, although none of the grebe species show well when the sea is choppy. **Red-throated Diver** is common, and **Black-throated** is regular. There is a good chance of one or two **Great Northern Divers**. There are several groups of **Velvet Scoter**, as well as healthy populations of **Common Eider**, **Long-tailed Duck** and **Red-breasted Merganser**.

Regaining the A915, follow the road east (it becomes the A917 at Upper Largo) for about 4.5 miles looking for the signposted turning to Kilconquhar (NO 478016). Directly opposite this turning is a single-track metalled road that leads to Shell Bay caravan and camping site, indicated by a

Some Velvet Scoters winter in Britain, and Largo Bay is one of the best sites to see the species in numbers.



RAN SCHOLS (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

prominent sign. Take this track through the plantation for just under one mile, and park at the free car park (NO 469004) ②.

The shrubs around the parking area hold good numbers of **Yellowhammer** and **Reed Bunting**. Coveys of the increasingly scarce **Grey Partridge** are regularly seen in the rough scrub and surrounding fields. Walk through the camping ground to Ruddons Point NR at the western end. A path leads through the narrow plantation (NO 458006) and there are good views over the sweep of the bay.

The saltmarsh neighbouring Cocklemill Burn holds good numbers of **Common Snipe**, while there are small numbers of overwintering **Jack Snipe** most years as well as the occasional **Woodcock**. Both **Merlin** and

Peregrine Falcon have been seen hunting the area, attracted by the waders.

Following the shoreline west, Ruddons Point ③ offers one of the finest seawatching points in Fife. The elevated position gives excellent views over Largo Bay, with a drake **Surf Scoter** returning most years, loosely associating with the **Velvet Scoter** flock. Numbers of **Red-throated** and **Black-throated Divers** and **Long-tailed Duck** should be present, and a large flock of **Common Scoter** is usually seen in close at the western extremity of the point. It cannot be long before a **Black Scoter** is seen there.

In the winter of 2013-14 a female **King Eider** joined the **Common Eider** flock and **Greater Scaup** is always a possibility.

The rocks on the southern

edge of the point hold a large wader roost as the tide comes in. From Ruddons Point there is an excellent walk along the coast east around Shell Bay, following the path up Kincaig Hill. Overwintering **Eurasian Whimbrel** have been noted on the rocks at Kincaig.

Returning to the A917, a visit to the village of Kilconquhar is always worthwhile for a scan from the cemetery at the rear of the church over Kilconquhar Loch ④, which holds good populations of wildfowl and attracts the occasional rarity such as **Great Egret**; free parking is available opposite the churchyard. A visit to the award-winning fish and chip shop in nearby Anstruther on the way home, with the chance of white-winged gulls in the harbour, is a good way to end the day. ■

i VISITOR INFORMATION

READS



Where to Watch Birds in Britain by Simon Harrap and Nigel Redman (second edition, Christopher Helm, £19.99) – order for £18.99 on page 77.

► Sites and access

Access and car parking at both locations is free. Note that the caravan and camping ground is closed in the winter. If the gate is open for maintenance work, do not drive in as unauthorised visitors are likely to be inadvertently locked in. Stagecoach Bus runs an hourly bus from Leven to St Andrews which calls at Lower Largo and Kilconquhar. The site is not suitable for wheelchair users as the paths are mostly rough tracks, although the camping ground roads would give access to Shell Bay with scope views of the wader roost.

► Maps

Ordnance Survey Explorers 370 and 371 and Landranger 59.

► Web resources

- www.fifebirdclub.org for news, recent sightings and a gallery of images.



See bit.ly/BWMaps for links to fully annotated Google maps

ORDNANCE SURVEY MAPPING © CROWN COPYRIGHT. AM45/10



DECEMBER'S TARGET BIRD

Short-eared Owl



STEFAN PRÜTZKE (WWW.GREEN-LENS.DE)

With its glaring yellow eyes, this beautiful owl is always a joy to see when out in the field. Often active in the daytime, as well as at night, it is very distinctive, with long wings, deep wing-beats and occasional glides.

Short-eared Owl is very widespread across the globe, and absent only from Antarctica and Australia. In Britain it breeds mainly in upland areas, mostly in northern England and Scotland, with some in Wales and eastern England. Its population stands at about 610-2,140 pairs, although its breeding numbers have halved in the last 40 years, mainly in Wales, following an increase until the 1970s.

It is more widespread across England and Wales in winter, when birds from northern Europe boost resident numbers. Such birds are mainly found on the east coast in autumn, with some staying for the winter.

Like many species that eat a high proportion of voles, it can

have years when its population booms, resulting in a bigger than usual influx of birds. In October 2011 46 owls were recorded arriving in one day in Norfolk. Communal roosts are not uncommon, sometimes holding large numbers: on 24 December 1972 no fewer than 116 Short-eared Owls roosted alongside Halvergate Fleet Bank, Norfolk.

How to see

The species' main hunting technique is to fly over rough grassland and fields a few feet from the ground, before dropping onto mammalian prey. It also chases small birds and even waders.

Search perches such as gates and fence posts, as well as low hummocks of grass. Winter raptor roosts can be a good place to see these owls, with birds usually flying in just before dusk and out just after dawn. They roost on the ground, so care must be taken not to disturb such sites. ■

i FIND YOUR OWN

In winter, coastal marshes and inland farmland with rough grass offer the best chance of seeing this bird. While some areas may hold owls most winters, communal roosts with many birds present may not be occupied every year. The sites mentioned below represent just a few of a large number of possible locations. They are usually reliable, but cannot be guaranteed to have birds every winter.

England

- **Cheshire:** Parkgate RSPB (SJ 273789)
- **Lincolnshire:** Frampton Marshes RSPB (TF 356392)
- **Norfolk:** Haddiscoe Marshes (TM 453991) and Buckenham Marshes RSPB (TG 351056)
- **Cambridgeshire:** Ouse Fen RSPB (TL 348729)
- **Essex:** Wallasea Island (TQ 945946)
- **Greater London:** Rainham Marshes RSPB (TQ 552792)
- **Kent:** Elmley Marshes RSPB (TQ 924698)
- **Somerset:** Steart Marshes (ST 274459)
- **West Sussex:** Pulborough Brooks RSPB (TQ 058164)

Wales

- **Conwy:** Kinmel Bay (SH 985803)



STEVE KNELL

Short-eared Owl is unusual in being largely diurnal. It is most often seen in winter when numbers are swelled by migrants from continental Europe.



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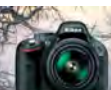
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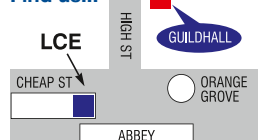
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Derek Moore: prominent and passionate conservationist who made a lasting impact on British wildlife.

1 January 1943-23 October 2014

To say that Derek Moore was larger than life, didn't suffer fools gladly and could talk the hind leg off a donkey – making you laugh till you cried – still doesn't do justice to the man. Derek was, quite simply, unforgettable.

Whether he was working tirelessly to save Britain's wildlife, chasing a rarity in his beloved Suffolk, refereeing the Birdfair football tournament or simply sitting outside the beer tent holding court to his many admirers, Derek always gave his all.

He was one of the true pioneers of modern conservation, coming up with ideas that rocked the old guard to the core: free entry to nature reserves, habitat offsetting and using Konik ponies to manage wetlands were just three of Derek's radical schemes that have now become mainstream conservation policy.

Growing up in Suffolk, Derek was first guided by the schoolmaster who, having spotted a copy of *The Observer's Book of Birds* in Derek's bag, offered to take him birding; and later by the legendary Bert Axell, who Derek helped build the famous Scrape at Minsmere RSPB.

Later in life, he became a mentor himself, and many of us – including TV naturalists Chris Packham and Mike Dilger – owe much to Derek's wise guidance. He was also very active in the birding scene, as a tour leader, county recorder for Suffolk and later around his new home in Mid Wales.

Although Derek entitled his 2013 memoirs *Birds: Coping with an Obsession*, his view of the world was far from one dimensional. His many other interests included cricket – which he played with a young David Frost – and he loved recounting the story of fielding at Lowestoft, Suffolk, on 3 September 1965 when the biggest-ever fall of migrant birds in Britain landed more or less on his head.

During the 1960s he was lead singer for a rock band, playing with some of the big

names of the period. He always claimed the gap between the Kinks' frontman Ray Davies's teeth was the result of Derek hitting him when he tried to pinch his guitar. It didn't really matter if this was true or not – it was still very entertaining.

He could be argumentative, passionate and single minded in his belief that conservation had to be workable and effective. But he could also be very kind. I was with him in Jordan in April 1997 when my mother died suddenly. Derek provided emotional support with one of his famous bear hugs; and then practical help to get me home as quickly as possible.

The first time I met him, he was doing a ringing demo with a group of children at Flatford Mill. He ringed a Kingfisher, and then placed it gently in a little girl's hand so she could release it. As the bird flew away, he turned to her and said: "Now, promise me you'll never forget that for the whole of your life." I'm sure she won't, and neither will I.

Although Derek was very ill towards the end, the old spirit was still there – he even kept a 'hospital bed list', reaching almost 40 species. On my last visit, he talked

passionately about current conservation issues, and then said: "I can't go now – I've still got so much to do." Sadly he won't be able to stand up for nature any more, but the rest of us can pledge to carry on Derek's fight for Britain's wildlife.

As I left, knowing this would be the last time I would see him, I said: "You know you're loved by an awful lot of people, don't you?" His reply, in that unmistakable Suffolk brogue, was typical: "Not by everyone!" Maybe not, but even those who disagreed with Derek learned to respect him. He may have made one or two enemies along the way, but he had a hell of a lot more friends.

Derek leaves a widow, Beryl, who supported him like a rock throughout his career, his children Bronwen and Jeremy (who followed his father to become an expert birder), and grandchildren Morris, Tara and Holly, of whom he was enormously proud. Birders all over Britain will join me sending their sympathy and best wishes to them all. **Stephen Moss**

• There will be a full tribute to Derek at next year's Birdfair.

Top: Derek Moore (left), Polish ornithologist Marek Borkowski (centre) and HRH Prince Philip (right) at Redgrave and Lopham Fen National Nature Reserve in Suffolk.

Right: Derek (right) with his wife Beryl, son Jeremy and his family.



WAYNE SIMPSON

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WALL CREEPER AND (INSET) SHORT-TOED EAGLE BY DOMINIC MITCHELL (WWW.BIRDINGETC.COM)



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and the country's attractions become irresistible.

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Guided by local expert Lyubomir Profirov, we will visit hot-spots including Besaparski Hills and the beautiful valley of the River Vacha. These sites will provide a taste of the country's special birds, perhaps including the gorgeous European Roller,

Stone-curlew, Long-legged Buzzard, Calandra Lark, Barred Warbler and, if our luck's in, Eastern Imperial Eagle.

One of the highlights of the trip will be a visit to the vulture feeding station at Madzharovo, in the rugged Eastern Rhodope mountains. Here it is possible to appreciate the size and splendour of these impressive scavengers, notably Egyptian and Griffon Vultures, and also the rare Black Vulture. Other raptors are conspicuous in this area and could include Golden, Short-toed and Booted Eagles and Long-legged Buzzard, while among mountain specialties are Western Rock Nuthatch and Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush, and a potentially exciting range of warblers including Eastern Bonelli's.

Those booked on the extension can look forward to visiting Cape

Kaliakra and Durankulak in the north-east. These must-visit locations, as well as nearby Shabla Lakes, should provide exciting species such as Pied and Isabelline Wheatears, Pygmy Cormorant, Marsh Sandpiper and Paddyfield and Savi's Warblers, both of which breed here. Moustached and Great Reed Warblers also nest, as do the likes of Purple Heron and Ferruginous Duck, while migrant passerines including chats, flycatchers and buntings could be possible at this coastal hot-spot.

Other mouth-watering species that might be seen include Alpine and Pallid Swifts, Crag Martin, Red-rumped Swallow, Blue Rock Thrush, Rock Bunting, Eastern Black-eared Wheatear, Sombre Tit, Masked Shrike and Olive-tree Warbler.

■ **This tour is operated for Birdwatch by the British-Bulgarian Friendship Society and Balkania Travel (fully bonded and licensed through the CAA, ATOL licence 4465). The price includes return international flights, guiding services, ground transportation and accommodation on a half-board basis. For an itinerary, reservations and full details of the extension, please contact the company on 020 7536 9400 or email ognian@balkaniatravel.com.**

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MARK AVERY

Manifesto for wildlife

Now is the time to put nature on the political agenda ahead of next year's general election. Join **Mark Avery** in showing ministers how important wildlife is.

Do you support the coalition government's cull of Badgers? If not, did you vote Conservative at the last General Election? If so, did you read the Conservative party's election manifesto which promised a Badger cull? Yes, it was quite clear that the Conservatives were going to be the Badger-killing party if elected, and although DEFRA has been rather unsuccessful in this aim, you can't say that government ministers haven't been trying to implement their manifesto commitment.

Voter influence

The manifestos are being written now. So, now is the time for you as a voter to try to influence their content. Once they are written, you can only choose between them.

A lobby of the Westminster parliament is being organised by a group of wildlife and animal welfare NGOs including the RSPB, the Wildlife Trusts and the League Against Cruel Sports. Taking place on 9 December, it will have a broad 'support wildlife' message. I'm pleased that this is a joint action as these issues are bigger than any single NGO.

Wildlife doesn't have a voice in parliament. You can be that voice by helping influence what your MP thinks and says, and by sending a strong message to all political parties that you want a fair deal for wildlife from the next government.

I can reveal here that the idea for this lobby came out of the discussions regarding what



DILIFF (COMMONS.WIKIMEDIA.ORG)

to do next after the success of Hen Harrier Day events on 10 August. The plight of Hen Harrier will be one of the particular issues highlighted on this day and is one of the issues that MPs will hear about.

Why 9 December? It's the day before the end of the Red Grouse shooting season – wouldn't it be good if it never re-opened? We can't promise that, but we can all try to do our bit. Save the date, and if you are free in central London on that day then do come along and help make the case for nature and to influence the various political parties' manifestos ahead of next year's general election. ■

Read more at www.markavery.info.

Save the date – a nature lobby will take place at the Palace of Westminster on 9 December. If you can make it on that date, add your voice to those calling for a better deal for wildlife.



Do this in December

- Add your voice to those attending the nature lobby at the Palace of Westminster by emailing or writing to your MP. Ask them to ensure that their party's manifesto is nature friendly, nature rich and nature enhancing so that they can get your vote next May. Check the websites of the RSPB, Wildlife Trusts and League Against Cruel Sports for suggestions of what to write, or read my blog at www.markavery.info/blog on 2 December to see what I write to my MP.
- You might want to mention Hen Harrier as an example of a threatened species which needs government action. To my mind, the best action from the next government would be to ban driven grouse shooting as it has proved itself to be so damaging for wildlife, water quality, flood risk and greenhouse gas emissions. You can sign the petition asking for a ban on driven grouse shooting here: <http://epetitions.direct.gov.uk/petitions/65627>.
- And why not vote for Bob too? Bob is a squirrel who is fronting the RSPB's call for political parties to do more for nature. Naff though he is, Bob deserves your support, which you can offer here: www.voteforbob.co.uk.

“Wildlife doesn't have a voice in parliament – you can be that voice by influencing what your MP thinks and says”

Getting away with murder

Over decades working as a volunteer raptor monitor on driven grouse moors in Scotland, our concerned correspondent has witnessed first-hand the illegal destruction of our wildlife. We have withheld his name to protect his identity, so that he can speak out frankly on criminal activities that go largely unchecked.

The illegal persecution of some of the uplands' most iconic bird species is all about providing more Red Grouse for hunters to shoot.



To grow up in the industrial north of England in the 1950s was to live in a Lowry-like world of pitheads and mill chimneys, stinking rivers and steam trains. Yet no more than a bus ride away were the sooty Pennine Hills, which every spring came alive with the calls of Eurasian Curlew and Northern Lapwing.

Thirty years on, childhood memories of life 'up on the tops' were stirred as I tramped the Scottish moors, hearing again the moorland birds that had fired my childhood imagination. I was eager to encounter all the other totemic species of upland Britain: Common Redshank, Common Snipe, European Golden Plover, Meadow Pipit, Skylark, Dipper and Ring Ouzel, and above all elusive birds of prey like Merlin, Peregrine Falcon, Hen Harrier and Short-eared Owl. Eventually I became a volunteer raptor monitor, proud possessor of the Schedule 1 licence which allowed intimate contact with the birds I most wanted to be near.

Those Scottish uplands were hardly bird heaven even in the early '80s – harriers were not much tolerated then, like today – but they still retained a passing resemblance to that rich ecosystem that landowners and gamekeepers would have us believe is the “well-managed grouse moor”. Swathes of deep heather dominated the landscape, belts of mature conifers provided shelter for sheep and nesting sites for crows, which could then be recycled by Merlins. Redundant railway trucks turned into sheds dotted the moorland, offering safe nesting for Swallows and wagtails. Roads across the hills were few and far between, power lines and windfarms a thing of the future.

Disappearing birds

Another 30 years on, and it is with waning enthusiasm that in early spring I embark on my annual round of those same estates in the quest for breeding raptors. Where once there were waders galore, and sometimes even a Hen Harrier to accompany the

Merlins and owls, I now wander across a barren and charred landscape, a grim monoculture where everything is subjugated to the industrial-scale production of Red Grouse.

Native British wildlife – corvids, Stoats, even Mountain Hares and Roe Deer – count simply as vermin, to be snared, trapped, shot and then disposed of in revolting, aptly named ‘stinkpits’. Although Merlins are not persecuted, their numbers have probably dropped by three quarters, a decline which may also be linked to the disappearance of farmland birds in the lowlands where they winter. Peregrines and Short-eared Owls have virtually disappeared.

A hundred or more wader chicks – including Oystercatcher, Northern Lapwing, Eurasian Curlew, Common Redshank and Common Sandpiper – were once regularly caught and ringed in a single season. These days



+ + exclusive

REBECCA COLE



Although Merlins are not particularly targeted by gamekeepers, their numbers have still fallen drastically.



Rail traps are legal for catching 'vermin' if covered. This one holds the desiccated body of a Dipper.

that figure struggles to reach double figures. Bulldozed tracks criss-cross a landscape scarred by electricity pylons and the wind turbines which provide yet more income for the wealthy owners of these so-called sporting estates.

Over the last 10 years, the burning regime on driven grouse moors, designed to encourage growth of the heather in which the grouse breed and feed, has intensified to the point where banks of mature heather are increasingly difficult to find. Vast areas of blackened peat support as little life as strips of concrete. It doesn't take much imagination to realise that this relentless burning, generously subsidised by British taxpayers, does little for the other wildlife which once abounded on this land.

It also contributes to global warming and localised flooding because the arsonised moorland ceases to function as a sponge during periods of heavy rainfall. And don't let anyone fool you that these Red Grouse are still truly wild birds. Regularly dewormed and fed on medicated grit, they are as pampered as household pets, and nothing, but nothing, can be allowed to impede their growth to the point when they can then be culled by the mega-rich in the name of recreational sport.

Indiscriminate trapping

As if the degradation of the moorland habitat through savage burning were not enough, the last few years have seen the proliferation of yet another threat to native wildlife: the indiscriminate and lethal rail trap. Gamekeepers and landowners swear by these traps, which are legal as long as they are covered. Sadly, there is plenty of evidence to show that they are also very effective killers not just of the Stoats and rats they are intended to eradicate, but of endangered bird species too. It is now well documented that Ring Ouzels and Dippers are among the unintended by-catch, and the time is surely ripe for a thorough review of their use.

One of the most intriguing features of raptor work at the sharp end is the relationship between gamekeepers and the mostly amateur field workers, nearly all members of the various Raptor Study Groups. Despite the many hours devoted to monitoring birds of prey, we are never more than visitors to the hills and

Large-scale burning of grouse moors to encourage the regrowth of heather – termed muirburn – has become normal; such degraded habitat offers little in the way of sustenance for wildlife.

+ + insider report

Where once hundreds of wader chicks like this Oystercatcher were trapped and ringed, these days only a handful are found on some Scottish upland estates.



OLIVER SMART (WWW.SMARTIMAGES.CO.UK)

moors we think we know so well. The keepers know them inside out, and without their help and co-operation (often openly and freely given, certainly where Merlins are concerned) there would be far less information on birds of prey to pass on to the agencies responsible for implementing the European Bird Directive, to which the UK government is a signatory.

Yet underlying these superficially cordial relationships is the knowledge that the absence of Hen Harriers on the moors – to take the most glaring example – can only be due to illegal persecution by the same people with whom we appear to be on quite friendly terms. In order to carry out the statutory monitoring of birds of prey, many raptor workers have to rely on the goodwill and co-operation of the very people they suspect of committing wildlife crimes.

The result is an uneasy compromise, and can occasionally lead to behaviour on the part of the raptor worker which some (including raptor workers themselves) may find problematic. Quite simply, there is often no point in reporting a suspected offence, for the simple certainties of everyday urban life do not apply to wildlife crimes committed on Britain's grouse moors today.

Discover a crime, report it to the police and let the law take its course – it's the obvious thing to do, isn't it? Well, not always. For in this area the legal process simply does not function as it does anywhere else in the realm. Report a suspected crime to the police, and all co-operation, including the vital permission to access the land by vehicle rather than on foot, would be withdrawn by the estate management. The police will often drag their feet, for they are members of the same close-knit rural communities as the people we would accuse. Their children go to the same school, they drink in the same pub, indeed they often consider themselves to be on the same side as the gamekeepers (think poachers).

Should a case of wildlife crime eventually reach the courts – and the odds are not very high – it may be that the local judge (or sheriff in Scotland) will be on nodding terms at least with the landowner on whose land the alleged crime was committed, and may even have been invited to take part in the occasional shoot. Should a guilty verdict prove to be unavoidable, sentences are derisory. In what other area of

life in modern Britain would the illegal possession of deadly poisons not result in a lengthy custodial sentence? Where else would employees found guilty of serious crimes be shielded by their employers rather than fired on the spot?

New laws

The realisation that gamekeepers living in tied cottages exist in a quasi-feudal relationship with their employer eventually led to the introduction of the law of vicarious liability in Scotland in 2011. This means that gamekeepers should no longer 'take the rap' for their masters, who could direct them to break the law in the interests of maximising the bag of grouse on 12 August. Only now is the first case being brought. In England, meanwhile, the former DEFRA minister Richard Benyon ensured that no equivalent law would be introduced south of the border. Benyon also happens to own a grouse moor where a poisoned Raven was found in 2009. The same former minister was responsible for issuing a licence to an English gamekeeper to destroy a buzzard nest with eggs, even though that keeper had reportedly been convicted of poisoning offences.

This example may incense many readers of *Birdwatch*, but raptor workers can cite numerous similar cases, and each and every one makes the blood boil. Yet as realists we know that the problem stems from the very nature of British society itself. For the people who have traditionally made, maintained and executed the law – the Establishment for want of a better word – are often the very same people on whose lands grouse are shot and birds of prey routinely persecuted. They do not regard themselves as criminals and behave as though the laws simply do not apply to them. That they continue to act with virtual impunity would suggest they are correct in their assumptions. It is all very well for British birders to complain about the killing fields of Malta, but our own country also needs to put its own house in order. Perhaps with Hen Harrier Day in August 2014 (see *Birdwatch* 266: 35-38 and 268: 54-59) we may have seen the start of a popular movement which will eventually force change.

What else might be done to improve a dire situation across Britain that is actually getting worse? For a start, the upper echelons of the RSPB, English Nature and Scottish Natural Heritage could be less deferential in their dealings with the

Aptly named 'stinkpits' hold the bodies of Mountain Hare, Fox and Roe Deer (left), while uncovered rail traps illegally catch Ring Ouzel (below), a Red-listed bird of Conservation Concern in Britain.



field sports lobby. Appeasement seldom works. Instead of praising the merits of an upland environment which hardly exists any more, and especially not on driven grouse moors, they should tell it how it is and how their own field workers know it to be.

No more lies

It is also time to nail the repeated lie by politicians, landowners and gamekeepers that only a tiny minority of 'rogue' gamekeepers persecutes raptors on driven grouse moors. If that were the case, why are there virtually no breeding Hen Harriers in England when there is room for at least 300 pairs? Why do Peregrine Falcons have such a hard time breeding on driven grouse moors? Why are there hardly any Golden Eagles in southern Scotland despite so much suitable habitat?

The very reasonable proposal that the Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SSPCA) should assist the hard-pressed police and take on a greater role in the investigation of wildlife crime has been met with a volley of protest from the Scottish Gamekeepers' Association and its

allies. You may well wonder why.

In the end, perhaps the only practical way forward in England is to do as Mark Avery has proposed and petition parliament to ban driven grouse shooting outright. If just one in 10 of the 'million voices for nature' that make up the RSPB's membership were to add their signature to this petition, then the issue would have to be debated at Westminster – and who knows what might then ensue? Remember, it was public pressure that brought about the ban on hunting with dogs. It would be such a fillip were the RSPB to add its weight formally to the petition and actively encourage its members to sign. Many of us are at a loss to know why it has so far failed to do so. After all, isn't it bound by its own charter "to conserve wild birds and the wider environment on which wild birds depend"?

As for Scotland, perhaps 2015 will at last see a prosecution brought under the law of vicarious liability. Most recently, the Scottish government has announced a restriction on the licences to shoot and trap 'vermin' on land where there is evidence of raptor crime. This may or may not prove effective, for Scottish landowners can afford very expensive lawyers. In the meantime, raptor workers will not be holding their breath. ■

WHAT YOU CAN DO

WILDLIFE crime seems to be increasing, with governments and conservation organisations reporting more incidences every year. Yet prosecutions are few and far between. Here are some ways you can help:

- Sign Mark Avery's petition to ban driven grouse shooting: <http://epetitions.direct.gov.uk/petitions/65627>.
- Write to your MP telling them your views on wildlife crime. If you don't know who your MP is, visit www.writetothem.com and enter your postcode. The site also provides an easy-to-use form you can fill in and send directly to your representative.
- Research which parties' policies are best for wildlife and the environment ahead of next year's General Election.
- Take part in next year's Hen Harrier Day – future issues of *Birdwatch* will cover this important day of protest.
- Report wildlife crime. If you see a crime in action call 999, but ensure your own safety first. For other enquiries call 101 or contact your local police force. Further information can be found at www.nwcu.police.uk. ■

Much of the uplands of Scotland are a monoculture of heather, where once they were a mixed habitat providing shelter for a variety of animals.



DAVID KJAER (WWW.DAVIDKJAER.COM)

The heat is on

JOHN STANTON



Climate change is seldom far from the headlines, not least because of the wild weather that so much of the country experienced last winter. Yet the issue is not as clear cut as it might appear. There has been a good deal of rhetoric, much of it at the expense of informed and reasoned argument, and much of it frequently dressed up to look like evidence. My aim here is to inject a note of sobriety into the debate.

Last summer, two pairs of Black-winged Stilts bred successfully, one in Kent and the other in West Sussex. Many greeted this with delight, but some chose to use the reports to highlight the issue of climate change by claiming that this was more evidence of increasing temperatures and anthropogenic climate change.

So, let's get a few things clear.

Climate change has occurred throughout the earth's climatic history,



Temperatures are rising, and much of what we read in the press is overhyped with very little evidence to back it up. Adrian Brockless says it's time to take a reasoned look at the human causes of climate change and how this is affecting bird populations.

sometimes with alarming rapidity; as such, it has happened, for the most part, without human input. During the Carboniferous period (363 to 290 million years ago), for example, the earth was much warmer than it is now; there was a great deal of vegetation and very little in the way of polar ice caps.

More recently, about 13,000 years ago, during the last ice age when there was only a minimal human presence on the planet – a presence that could not be construed as liable to impact climatic conditions – a rapid increase in global temperature of between 6°C and 10°C took place in the space of just a few hundred years. A mere 2,000 years later, the temperature suddenly dropped and the ice re-advanced only to retreat again after a few hundred years; by 10,000 years ago the last of the ice retreated from Britain.

Human touch

However, it remains true that anthropogenic climate change is a consequence of our releasing carbon dioxide and methane into the atmosphere. Water vapour, carbon dioxide and methane are all greenhouse gases in that they make the atmosphere far more efficient at retaining heat. Methane is by far

The Black-winged Stilts at Medmerry RSPB, West Sussex, successfully fledged three chicks. Taken on their own, such events are perhaps indicative of man-made climate change rather than proof.



Left: Arctic species such as Snowy Owl have also bred in Britain in the past – is this proof of ‘global cooling’?

Inset: taking a more sober approach to climate change doesn’t mean denying its existence. We need to act now to reduce human-cause global warming.

MARTIN SMART. INSET: JOOST J BAKKER (COMMONS.WIKIMEDIA.ORG)

generally speaking, a little more extreme in the southern hemisphere than it is in the northern, since the summer of the northern hemisphere is cooled slightly due to its greater distance from the sun and its winter is warmed slightly due to its greater proximity to the sun.

As the earth oscillates between these two situations, energy transference patterns within the atmosphere change accordingly and affect surface meteorology. In addition, the axial inclination of the earth – its tilt – also varies by between about 22° and 24.5° over a cycle of some 40,000 years. This means that the amount of solar radiation received by polar latitudes varies. This will have a profound effect on the amount of ice cover, which in turn will affect how much solar radiation is reflected back into

space. Each of these factors

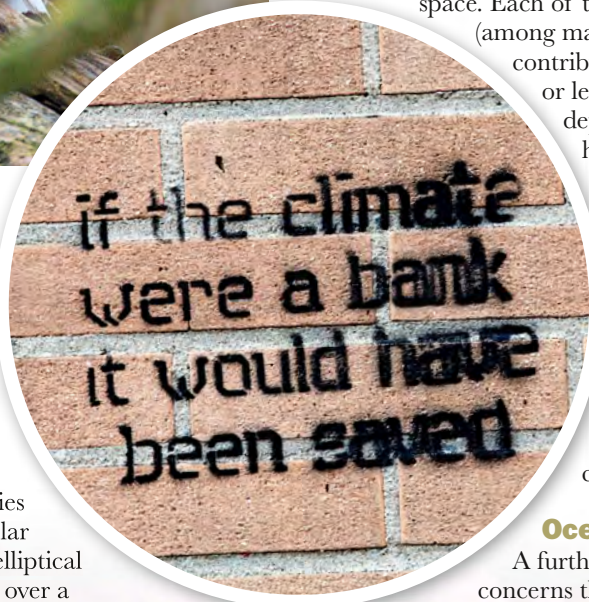
(among many others) contribute – more or less effectively depending on how they are combined with one another – to climate change, in addition to the influence of atmospheric composition.

the most effective – about 25 times more so than carbon dioxide (CO₂). We are responsible for climate change insofar as we release such gases into the environment in ways that would not have otherwise occurred.

It is not the case – as has often been reported in the media, by politicians and, to some degree, certain conservation organisations – that climate change is answerable solely to anthropogenic activity. Such a hypothesis could only be true if it could be proven that all non-anthropogenic causes of climate change have now ceased. Thus far, no science has supported this idea.

Non-anthropogenic causes of climate change are multifarious and are not

merely due to atmospheric composition (although all these factors are related). The path that the earth describes around the sun – its orbit – varies from near circular to much more elliptical and back again over a period of about 95,000 years. Currently the earth is closest to the sun during the summer of the southern hemisphere and furthest away during its winter. Thus at present the climate is,



Ocean going

A further factor concerns the distribution and types of oceanic plankton. It is plankton in the oceans that absorb the most CO₂, not rainforests. If the ecological make-up of the oceans changes in ways that

Anthropogenic climate change: burning fossil fuels releases greenhouse gases into the environment that otherwise wouldn't be there.



FINTON DAWSON (COMMONS.WIKIMEDIA.ORG)

lowers their capacity to absorb CO₂ then this will, with emissions (man-made or otherwise) remaining as they are, increase the amount of carbon dioxide in the earth's atmosphere, since the absorption rates will be slower.

What is interesting about this is that plankton – like any other life form – changes its distribution and abundance. Different species will, at different times, enjoy different amounts of success; some will become extinct and new species will evolve.

Factors that drive these changes are various but, in short, they can be understood as a result of changes in external conditions and evolutionary adaptations in the species themselves. These two factors are heavily interwoven with one another and it is not easy to separate out which has been dominant in any specific instance. Whatever the case in relation to any particular species, it is clear that we cannot say it is only changes in external conditions that result in differences in the distribution of a species; that is as much the case with plankton as it is with birds.

Given that plankton are responsible for much of the absorption of CO₂, any changes in their populations will impact the ability of the oceans to absorb the gas and, as such, affect climate change. On a smaller scale, it is therefore impossible to make a reasonable claim about whether or not the breeding of two pairs of Black-winged Stilts is the result of anthropogenic climate change or, indeed, climate change at all.

Collared twitch

To make this clearer, take as an example Collared Dove, which didn't breed in Britain until 1955 (and was famously twitched by Bill Oddie), but is now an almost unavoidable sight in rural and suburban England. The population explosion that this species has enjoyed may be due to minute changes in external conditions and have very little to do with an evolutionary adaptation in the birds themselves; equally, one might argue the opposite. Certainly, such small changes have not been identified, merely speculated about, and it would seem to be a near-impossible task to isolate them if they even exist. Thus, to use Collared Dove's success as definite evidence for such small changes in climate is spurious. One could use Little Egret as another example to illustrate the same point.

That, of course, is not to deny that



OLIVER SMART (WWW.SMARTIMAGES.CO.UK)

“We should all take an unqualified delight in the fact that Black-winged Stilts are breeding in this country”

distribution of avifauna is heavily influenced by climate, but what needs to be understood is that such claims can only be made where a definite chain of cause and effect can be clearly identified. More research is needed before we can say that such changes in distribution are specifically answerable to human activity. Until one can decisively separate out (proportionally as a percentage) anthropogenic climate change from changes caused by other factors, it will not be possible to say, with any clarity, by how much we are influencing bird distribution in terms of climate.

It is also interesting to note that the arrival of the stilts and of species such as Little Egret have been attributed specifically to climate change associated

with warming. If one is to be balanced, one should look at the species with an Arctic distribution that have also, on occasion, bred in Britain, such as the Snowy Owls that bred on Shetland between 1967 and 1975 and remained there for a long while after that (I saw one on Fetlar in 1989). Using the same arguments associated with the arrival of the stilts, one might be inclined to say that this is evidence of global cooling!

It is a fact that the earth's climate has been steadily warming since the end of the last ice age and one cannot deny that human beings are responsible for further increases than would otherwise have been the case, through our releasing of greenhouse gases. None of what I have said should be understood as a denial of anthropogenic climate



DAVID KJAEER (WWW.DAVIDKJAEER.COM)

Little Egret (above) has successfully colonised Britain, while this year two pairs of European Bee-eater (left) fledged a total of eight chicks. This is a cause for celebration rather than definitive evidence of increasing temperatures.

change or of the impact that this has on the distribution and continued survival of avian (and other) species. Instead, I am calling for sobriety among those who are apt to make claims about anthropogenic climate change based on what can only be sympathetically described as circumstantial evidence.

Recently, when I voiced these thoughts to a friend he replied by saying that we should concentrate on minimising anthropogenic climate change and pollution more generally by any means possible, even if that did mean being creative – perhaps by making overly sensational claims about anthropogenic climate change supported by events that cannot be counted as evidence for it. I disagree. It is imperative that the arguments do not become shrill or hysterical, and that is the risk we run if we start invoking the presence of two pairs of stilts in Britain as a call to arms to fight climate change.

When I worked as a species protection warden for Little Terns on the Northumberland coast, I was witness to the effects of climate change first hand. Summer storms of increased intensity resulted in the loss of eggs and chicks (see *Birdwatch* 230: 45-48). If we are to fight the anthropogenic causes of climate change – and pollution more generally – we need to be reasoned in our approach to persuade those outside the conservation sector.

Risk assessment

The creative approach that my friend suggested compromises the fight because it condescends to the public and risks being ‘found out’ as embroidered, or simply bogus; this will not engender sympathy or trust and could result in a lack of public pressure on the government. To gain and maintain trust, conservation organisations need to distance themselves from politics and

politically motivated arguments but without reducing their lobbying power.

Difficult though this task may be, due in no small part to the complexity of the science involved, the significance of the climate change issue, in all sorts of ways, means that the campaign to reduce anthropogenic causes of climate change cannot afford to risk being trivialised.

That means ensuring that the public and politicians are educated with the facts, as opposed to being persuaded by sensationalist stories based on spurious evidence which will be vulnerable to parody and doubt. We should all take an unqualified delight in the fact that Black-winged Stilts are breeding in this country and, indeed, in whatever wildlife we are fortunate enough to encounter. ■

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Scare tactics and overstating the case for climate change are not the way to bring about public support for the fight against global warming.



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Common and Rough-legged Buzzards

PHOTO GUIDE

1



RENTON CHARMAN

1 Common (left) and Rough-legged (right) Buzzards (Sleddale, Cumbria, 4 November 2014). This fantastic side-by-side portrait from this autumn's influx shows clearly the marked difference between these two species. The slightly more 'eagle-like' structure of the Rough-legged Buzzard (right) can just about be discerned here, but the definitive feature is the extensive white tail base and very broad dark terminal band, a combination never shown by Common Buzzard and unique to juvenile Rough-legged.

PROFILE



ANDY STODDART is Vice Chairman of the Rarities Committee and has many years' birding experience. He is also author of several books and ID papers.

With the increase in numbers of Common Buzzard and the spread of its range throughout eastern England, the greater frequency of pale birds means the potential for confusion with the much rarer Rough-legged Buzzard is a real pitfall. There has been an influx of the latter species this winter, so as *Andy Stoddart* reveals, there is no better time to get to grips with the identification issues and test yourself in the field.



BASIC PRINCIPLES

The sight of a ghostly Rough-legged Buzzard is the highlight of any winter day, but a regular problem facing observers and county records committees is that of separating these Scandinavian visitors from Common Buzzard, the not infrequent pale examples of which can closely resemble their much rarer cousin.

Common Buzzard

One of the major ornithological success stories of the last 20 years has been the eastward march of Common Buzzard. For decades confined to traditional strongholds in the upland west and north, it has spread relentlessly east across the Midlands, the South-East and East Anglia.

Almost unknown in these areas in the 1980s, it is now an everyday sight there; indeed this is now Britain's commonest diurnal raptor. Significant movements of Common Buzzards are today recorded in eastern England, both in spring and autumn, but these are poorly understood and the degree of interchange with the Continent (if any) remains unknown.

Rough-legged Buzzard

By contrast, the status of Rough-legged Buzzard has changed little over recent decades. This tundra and taiga breeder has always been a scarce, irruptive visitor to eastern England, particularly East Anglia and Kent. Its arrivals from Scandinavia are triggered by shortages of its small mammal prey (mostly voles) and are therefore erratic and unpredictable.

In years with plentiful food in the home range hardly any reach Britain, but very occasionally when food sources collapse significant irruptions can occur. In most

“Common Buzzards come in a bewildering variety of plumages, from dark through medium to pale”

years, however, just a few arrive, typically in October, and take up winter territories, departing the following spring.

This occurrence pattern in eastern England (and the fact that Rough-legged Buzzard is rather rare in Scotland) indicates that our birds probably arrive through northern Germany and The Netherlands rather than undertaking the long sea crossing from Norway.

Wintering English birds often choose rough coastal grassland, and certain sites are favoured time and again. No site is occupied every winter, however, and some are empty for years on end. Birds can also penetrate a little inland, where they can be harder to find in the patchwork of copses and agricultural land. Their relatively sedentary habits in winter, spending long periods just sitting about, also make them harder to find.

Identification

Common Buzzards come in a bewildering variety of plumages, ranging from relatively dark through medium to pale. Most fall somewhere in the medium range, but some are much paler, a few strikingly so. While the species' new abundance provides ample opportunity for familiarity, it also means that there are more of these pale birds in circulation, thereby increasing the chances of confusion with Rough-legged Buzzard.

Pale Common Buzzards can be almost white about the head and underbody,

with bright white underwings and white in the tail base. However, they will always show a number of features never seen in Rough-legged Buzzard. For example, the central belly is often white, the dark 'wrist patches' on the underwing are often reduced to narrow comma-shaped marks, and the white in the tail base is usually diffuse, 'bleeding' into the dark tail. The rump is often white, too, and the scapulars and inner wing coverts can also be contrastingly whitish. Any buzzard showing one or more of these characters will be a pale Common Buzzard.

In North America, Rough-legged Buzzards come in both dark and pale morphs, but European birds are all pale. The key feature is the tail pattern, best appreciated from above as it can be a little blurred and difficult to interpret from below.

Juveniles show a white tail with a broad solid dark tip (occasionally covering most of the tail), while adults have several thin black subterminal bands close together and a white tail-tip. Neither pattern is shown by Common Buzzard.

Ageing is also key to understanding the other plumage features of Rough-legged Buzzard. The more frequently encountered juveniles show a pale head and upper breast but a large dark belly patch; the underwings are white with prominent, almost rectangular dark 'wrist' patches. A whitish upperwing 'flash' is often present in the inner primaries. Adult

females are rather similar to juveniles, but lack the upperwing flash and show the adult-type tail pattern described above.

Adult males look rather different, being darker headed and darker breasted and having a less striking belly patch, in this respect being more like Common Buzzard, especially when perched. However, they still look 'cold' and greyish overall, never warm or rusty brown. In flight things get easier, with the tail pattern, as ever, the clincher.

Plumage is, however, not necessarily the easiest way of separating this pair, especially at range. In reality, the two species are decidedly different in both structure and flight action. Common Buzzard is typically rather compact and short tailed. It also looks somewhat short winged and has a distinctive stiff wing action. It can, however, hover quite well, sometimes for lengthy periods.

By contrast, Rough-legged Buzzard is a much more elegant bird, larger, longer tailed and usually appearing strikingly longer winged. These proportions give it a notably fluid, relaxed wing-beat (sometimes rather harrier-like) and further enhance the impression of a large, powerful, almost eagle-like raptor. Just like Common Buzzard, it can spend long periods at rest, but when hunting it is a habitual and proficient hoverer.

Finally, any claim of Rough-legged Buzzard should be subject to a 'reality check'. Outside the October to May period and away from eastern England, the chances of this species are extremely low. Pale Common Buzzards are, however, present throughout the year and can be found across the whole of the country. ■



2



TONY COOMBS (WWW.WINGSANDTHINGS PHOTOGRAPHY.CO.UK)

2 Common Buzzard (Gigrin Farm, Rhayader, Powys, 26 May 2012). With its pale 'frosty' head, this bird might attract attention as a Rough-legged Buzzard candidate. However, a pale-headed appearance is typical of pale Common Buzzards and everything else visible here is entirely consistent with that diagnosis. The underbody pattern – a particularly useful feature – is not visible in this image, but one look at the wholly brown, finely barred tail seals the deal.

3



JEROEN STEL (WWW.BIRDIRMAGENCY.COM)

3 Rough-legged Buzzard (Flevoland, The Netherlands, 12 March 2011). This bird also shows a pale head and, helpfully, a solid dark chocolate brown patch is present on the lower breast, belly and flanks. Such an extensive and solidly dark area on the rear underparts is never shown by Common Buzzard and this bird can therefore confidently be identified as a Rough-legged. Though the tail looks extensively dark, this is consistent with some juvenile Rough-leggeds. In flight this bird would still show some white in the tail base.

4



STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

4 Common Buzzard (Falsterbo, Sweden, 5 September 2010). This bird looks extremely pale and eye-catching. It is, however, an entirely typical example of a very pale Common Buzzard. The structure – short, broad wings and short, broad tail – is classic Common Buzzard, while the plumage detail is typical too. Note the reduced, comma-shaped dark ‘wrist patches’ (these are much more extensive in Rough-legged) and, most obviously, the wholly white underbody – a pattern never shown by any Rough-legged Buzzard of any age.

5



GRAHAM CATLEY

5 Rough-legged Buzzard (Grindale, East Yorkshire, 27 November 2014). By contrast, this bird shows all the classic features of a juvenile Rough-legged Buzzard – a ‘frosty’ pale head combined with a solid dark belly patch, shining white underwings, extensive ‘wrist patches’ and a white tail with dark terminal band. The structure can be appreciated here too – rather long winged and ‘rangy’ with a prominent head and a longer-tailed outline than is ever shown by Common Buzzard. In life, Rough-legged Buzzards have a soft, fluid flight action more akin to a harrier or a small eagle than a Common Buzzard.



6



STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

6 Common Buzzard (Seaforth, Lancashire, 2 April 2011). This rather typically plumaged Common Buzzard is showing its underwing pattern well. No Rough-legged Buzzard shows such extensive brown in the underwing coverts, while the tail can be seen to be uniform pale brown below and finely barred. Also obvious is the typically short-winged and short-tailed appearance of Common Buzzard, a structure which translates in real life into a distinctive stiff, rather rapid wing action.

7



JARI PELTOWÄKI (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

7 Rough-legged Buzzard (Pyhäjoki, Finland, 17 April 2008). This Rough-legged Buzzard lacks the prominent dark belly patch of juveniles and females, showing instead a rather more Common Buzzard-like pattern. This pattern is, however, typical of adult male Rough-leggeds, an identification that can be confirmed by its shining white underwings, extensive dark 'wrist patches' and, best of all, a white tail with a dark band. As confirmation of this bird's age, and therefore its identity, note the detail of the tail pattern. Instead of the broad dark terminal band of a juvenile, it shows a narrower dark subterminal band with further thin dark lines along the inner edge – the classic adult pattern.



8



DAVID FEATHERBE (WWW.DAVIDFEATHERBE.CO.UK)

8 Common Buzzard (Gigrin Farm, Rhayader, Powys, 7 March 2010). With such extensive warm brown hues on the underbody and underwing, this is an 'easy-to-identify' Common Buzzard. Indeed the brown in the underwing coverts is so extensive that the dark 'wrist patches' barely stand out. The tail can also be seen to be uniformly coloured, while the short wings and short tail are again characteristic of our commonest raptor.

9



STEFAN PFÜTZKE (WWW.GREEN-LENS.DE)

9 Rough-legged Buzzard (Hokkaido, Japan, 12 February 2012). This lovely snow-lit portrait of a hovering Rough-legged Buzzard, accentuating its white 'frosty' head, underwings and inner tail, reminds us that this is a real Arctic species. On such a close view it is also possible to see its greater feather density or 'fluffiness', an adaptation to colder climes shared with other Arctic inhabitants such as Arctic Redpoll. This bird also shows a clear white 'flash' in the upper primaries – a feature shown by many (though not all) Rough-leggeds.



10



RENÉ POP (WWW.RENEPOP.NL/EN)

10 Common Buzzard (Texel, The Netherlands, 28 November 2012). The short-winged and short-tailed outline of this Common Buzzard is beautifully shown here, as is a complete suite of diagnostic plumage features, most notably uniform warm brown hues in the head, upperparts and upperwing, and a concolorous brown uppertail with fine barring throughout its length.

11



MARKUS VARESVUO (WWW.BIRDPHOTO.FI)

11 Rough-legged Buzzard (Porvoo, Finland, 6 February 2006). This bird, by contrast, shows a complete set of juvenile Rough-legged Buzzard characters – a pale, ‘frosty’ head, a bright white tail base and a broad dark brown terminal band. Although this is sufficient to nail its identification, the white ‘flash’ in the upper primaries is a useful confirmatory feature. Note, again, the rather more elegant, long-winged and long-tailed, almost harrier-like outline of this species.



Find your own Rough-leg

Being unspecific in its choice of habitat **Common Buzzard**, Britain's commonest bird of prey, is straightforward to find almost anywhere and, as a resident, at any time of year.

Rough-legged Buzzard, on the other hand, is a rare winter visitor to the British Isles. Numbers vary on an annual basis. In most years just a handful of birds appear, but occasionally there are big influxes – one of which was currently ongoing as the magazine went to press.

The east coast between Lothian and Kent offers the best chance to see the species and, although locations generally vary year on year, traditional sites include the

Isle of Sheppey, Kent, the east Norfolk Broads (particularly Haddiscoe and Thorpe Marshes), Holkham, Norfolk, and, further north, Sleddale, North Yorkshire (NZ 619120).

With birds more numerous this autumn and winter, birders have been afforded the luxury of not having to travel as far to see one of these northern visitors and this will likely continue throughout the season. Good numbers have been reported from the expected east coast counties, with several sites registering multiple birds, including Sleddale, North Yorkshire, Burnham Overy Marshes, Norfolk (TF 860447), and Breydon Water, Norfolk (TG

494081). There have also been sightings from the South Pennines: regular reports have come from Broomhead Moor, South Yorkshire (SK 224952). Furthermore, several obliging individuals have been found in inland counties and as far south as East Sussex.

Keeping tabs on the latest sightings nationwide (see www.birdguides.com) is instrumental if you want to see Rough-legged Buzzard this winter. In a year where the species is so numerous, however, there's every chance one could pop up at a site local to you – it's well worth checking any pale Common Buzzards you see between now and April! ■

FURTHER READING



The Raptors of Europe and the Middle East: a Handbook to Field Identification by Dick Forsman

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Quiz bird



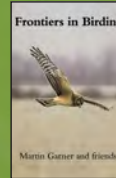
IT'S a crisp winter's morning, and you are birding a favourite patch of coastal grazing marsh. Scouring the open landscape with a scope, you quickly home in on a strikingly pale raptor alighting on a fencepost.

The bird has settled on its lookout perch, so you have some time – but can you clinch it? Clearly a *Buteo* on size, shape and 'jizz', it has the extensive pale areas typically associated with Rough-legged Buzzard. What's more, BirdGuides has been buzzing with reports of this very scarce northern winterer in recent days. Can you identify with certainty, or is a pale Common Buzzard a real possibility?

How to enter

Once think you have the right answer, let us know the identity of the mystery buzzard in this photo. Go to bit.ly/bw270BuzzardQuiz, but be quick, as the competition closes on 12 December. The answer will be available online at www.birdwatch.co.uk/win from 15 December, and the first randomly chosen reader with the correct answer will win a copy of Martin Garner's *Frontiers in Birding*.

Many congratulations to last month's winner, Abigail Rhodes of Tongue, Highland, who correctly identified the mystery pipit as a Buff-bellied. ■



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A black and white photograph of a Scopac Plus telescope. The telescope is shown from a side-on perspective, highlighting its long barrel and the objective lens at the front. The eyepiece is visible at the rear. The text "Scopac Plus" is printed in a bold, sans-serif font above the telescope.

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GEORGE RESZETER

Tackling the hunters in Cyprus



European Bee-eaters (main photo) are among the many bird species indiscriminately trapped in mistnets (inset).



Champions of the Flyway 2014 was a huge success, raising thousands of pounds for conservation in Georgia. Next year's event aims to be even bigger, says organiser **Jonathan Meyrav, and will support the fight against illegal bird killing in Cyprus.**

The Israel Ornithological Center (SPNI) and BirdLife International have recently announced the next Champions of the Flyway conservation cause (see *Birdwatch* 262: 34-37 and 263: 54-56). Following the astounding success of the 2014 project that addressed the illegal hunting of birds in Georgia and raised \$30,000 for conservation work, the chosen project for 2015 is Cyprus.

The scale of the illegal hunting of birds on this small Mediterranean island is staggering. Champions of the Flyway will work together with the BirdLife Cyprus team, hoping to raise some serious money and awareness to help tackle the issue. We invite you to get involved with what is turning into the biggest bird race for conservation in the world.

This year's event

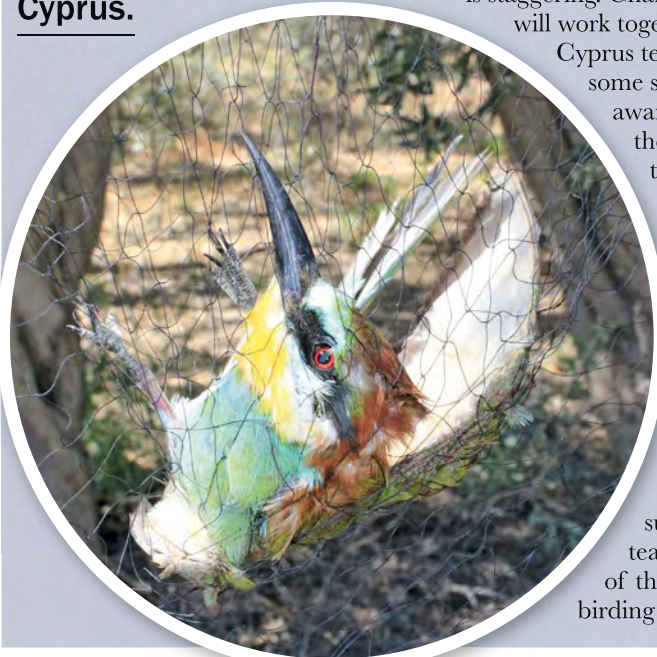
The 2014 Champions of the Flyway (COTF) event was a huge success. A total of 23 teams – including some of the biggest names in birding – stepped up for

the first ever COTF bird race in Eilat. The teams consisted of three or four birders all trying to log as many species as possible within 24 hours in a designated 'playing field'.

Not only did the race generate great drama and excitement, it reached an amazing number of people worldwide. The idea of a fast-paced bird race in Eilat at the peak of migration caught the attention of just about every birder out there. The fact that the project's main goal is to seriously counter the illegal hunting of birds along the flyways is the key to its success, and what makes the Champions of the Flyway project so special, now and for years to come.

Following a few days of scouting led by the SPNI leaders, the teams hit the ground running at midnight on 1 April. It was a fascinating race both in terms of the species found and also in terms of strategy and route planning, which turned out to be key factors for the winning teams.

The event succeeded in becoming the first major bird race that encouraged and acknowledged the sharing of information in real time. The teams, despite being very competitive, were also very friendly and shared information both in the



BIRDLIFE CYPRUS



Unauthorised mistnets and limesticks are illegal in Cyprus, yet hunters use them with impunity, catching such birds as this Red-backed Shrike (left), Song Thrush (above) and Eurasian Scops Owl (below).

field and via social media. The race shone a new light on birding: a positive light of peer-hood and sharing, showing that the best teams are the ones that manage to find the most birds, but also share their finds with others. Social media platforms also allowed many people worldwide to follow the race almost as it happened.

More than a million people worldwide were exposed to the project. Thousands were engaged during the 24-hour race and the social media reach was

unprecedented for a birding event. The incredible reach of the project had two direct effects. The first was that many hundreds of people worldwide donated to the project. The second was the fact that those teams that took part got great exposure for their efforts and new relationships were forged.

The results

The 2014 winners were the Palestine Sunbirders, a joint Israeli and Palestinian team, and the Cornell

eBirders, with both teams being named the 2014 Champions of the Flyway. The Sunbirders logged a whopping 169 species, while the Cornell team scored 165, which is truly remarkable for a team that had never before birded in Israel.

Several other teams stood out, winning accolades in the other categories. The Focus on Wildlife Sprinters were named Knights of the Flyway as the team that shared the most information before and during the race. The team that raised the most money for the project, the Flyway Racers led by Colin Shields, were awarded the Protectors of the Flyway accolade – they raised an incredible \$10,000 via donations. Our good friends at Swarovski Optik generously donated the prizes for the race and will continue supporting the project in 2015.

For more information about the project and the 2014 race, visit www.champions-of-the-flyway.com. You can also watch the official Champions film (www.youtube.com/watch?v=jIrHupa19RY), which truly captures the essence and spirit of the race.

The project continues

Champions of the Flyway looks set to grow and grow in forthcoming years. The structure is simple: every year teams will assemble at Eilat, one of the best migration hot-spots on the planet, race and raise money and awareness



ALL PHOTOS: BIRDLIFE CYPRUS

for a specific conservation cause chosen in collaboration with BirdLife International. In 2014 the beneficiary was the Batumi Bottleneck Project, led by the team from Bird Conservation Georgia.

Following discussions with BirdLife, we are happy to announce Cyprus as the conservation cause to be addressed in 2015. The number of birds illegally killed on this Mediterranean island is overwhelming and it has become a real death trap to countless thousands of birds every migration season. The BirdLife Cyprus team is doing great work on the ground, under difficult conditions. But hunting on the island is so widespread and the hunters so numerous that much still needs to be done.

From bad to worse

Cyprus is a small island, roughly 150 miles long by 62 miles wide. It is a crucial stop-over site for migrants crossing the Mediterranean. The volume of avian passage through the island is incredible, with millions of songbirds, waterfowl and birds of prey passing through twice a year.

This small island has a complicated political division. It is separated into the Republic of Cyprus in the southern two-thirds and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus in the northern third. In the middle is the United Nations-controlled Green Line which occupies about 3 per cent of the island and provides a buffer zone between the two.



DUVAL VAX

Participants in the 2014 Champions of the Flyway bird race, including the Birdwatch-BirdGuides Roadrunners, consisting of Dominic Mitchell, Ian Lycett, Mike Alibone and Morton Bentzon Hansen. The winning teams (below right) shared the title of Champions of the Flyway 2014.

There are also two British bases located on the island.

The hunting or trapping of birds in Cyprus is rooted deeply in the culture and lifestyle of many of the island's inhabitants. Evidence of such hunting there dates back to the Middle Ages. Sadly, the situation today has very little to do with tradition or history. In the past songbirds, mainly Blackcaps, were trapped for consumption by poor islanders living off the land.

The trapping of birds has been illegal since 1974, when non-selective methods such as mistnets and limesticks were

prohibited. Further legislation followed in the 1980s, but unfortunately these rules have absolutely no effect on the ground. Nowadays bird trapping in Cyprus is widespread and extensive, and increasingly out of control. Recent surveys show that more than 150 bird species have been found in illegal traps, including no fewer than 78 species that are listed as threatened by the EU.

The BirdLife Cyprus team is struggling to keep up with the alarming rise in illegal trapping and hunting activities in the country. Their desperate pleas to the various authorities usually



ROBIN CHITTENDEN (WWW.ROBINCHITTENDEN.CO.UK)

How they should be seen: a juvenile Red-backed Shrike (above) and Song Thrush (right) in the field.



STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)



do not amount to enough enforcement on the ground. The complicated political situation makes dealing with the problem even more difficult. These are the reasons we need to raise awareness and support for the BirdLife Cyprus projects, as complete populations of birds are slowly being wiped out, one season at a time.

The situation in Cyprus truly is horrible, and hundreds of thousands of birds are slaughtered on the island every migration season. Regardless of the Champions of the Flyway campaign, please visit the BirdLife Cyprus website to learn more about the problem and how you can help support their work: www.birdlifecyprus.org.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the BirdLife Cyprus team for providing images and background data for this article.

HOW YOU CAN GET INVOLVED

THE grim images in this article reflect the sad situation on the ground in Cyprus, and in many other places. The phrase 'free as a bird' is not a given these days, as complete populations of migrants are steadily being eliminated. Illegal hunting and trapping were always an issue, but modern methods and availability of efficient traps are two factors that are tipping the scales against the birds.

With this in mind, the Champions of the Flyway campaign carries with it a message of hope, of partnerships and organisations working together for a joint cause. We know that there are many birders and nature lovers out there who can relate to the cause and help us make a difference.

There are several ways to take part in the Champions of the Flyway:

1 Create a team: want to take part in the race? Thinking of coming to Eilat in spring 2015? Enlist a couple of friends and put your own team together. Packages for the race are competitive and all profits from the event will go to conservation. For more details on participating, contact us at jm2bird@gmail.com.

2 Sponsor a team: competing teams need your support! Pick a team and sponsor them to help



cover their participation costs. All sponsors are welcome, large and small, and remember that the project has incredible reach and those who support teams will receive good exposure.

3 Donate on behalf of your team: the teams are also competing to raise the most money for the cause (the Protectors of the Flyway category). Choose a team to support and pledge a donation on their behalf through the team's Just Giving page – no sum is too small.

4 Support our conservation projects: you can also donate directly to the chosen conservation project. The

campaign against the illegal hunting of birds relies mainly on donations. All monies will be processed through BirdLife International.

So please join the Champions of the Flyway campaign, spread the word and donate some money if you can. This is a real chance to help us make a difference, and actually take part in the conservation of birds.

Together we can stop illegal hunting and let migrants travel safely through quiet skies. You can follow the project at www.champions-of-the-flyway.com and on Twitter [@Flywaychampions](https://twitter.com/Flywaychampions).



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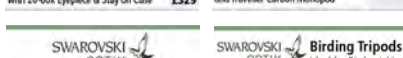
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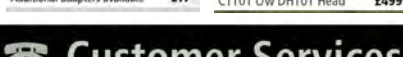
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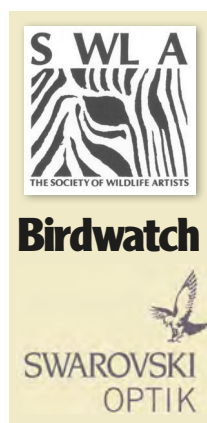
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Birdwatch Artist of the Year 2014

The high quality of the works on show made the judges' job a difficult one, but this year's Artist of the Year Award culminated with a clear winner at the SWLA's annual exhibition. **Rebecca Armstrong** reports from London's Mall Galleries.



Visiting the Mall Galleries in London for the Society of Wildlife Artists' (SWLA) annual exhibition *The Natural Eye*, which celebrates all wildlife in its natural habitat, is always a treat, and this year was no different. The special ceremony which opens the event incorporates the presentation of the prestigious Birdwatch Artist of the Year Award.

Wildlife art often doesn't get the recognition it deserves in the wider art world, but the quality and variety of works on show here disprove any theory that such art is in any way inferior. It's not just birds, either – insects, butterflies and mammals are all represented.

This year the ceremony was opened by Andy Clements, Director of the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO). He gave a fascinating speech about a partnership that might not be the most obvious – that between art and science – and talked about a “brilliant collaboration” between BTO researchers and members of the SWLA.

Artists to Africa was the subject of the Out of the Frame room. Four artists had accompanied the BTO to Senegal in West Africa, where the organisation is studying the wintering grounds of British summer migrants. Their resulting sketches adorned the walls of the room. Ranging from the almost impressionistic to highly detailed studies, the works are truly evocative of ‘our’ birds in their very different winter quarters.

These birds – Common Cuckoo, Swallow, Nightingale and so on – are some of our best-loved and most familiar species, and yet they are suffering huge declines. The BTO is trying to understand why this is happening so that measures can be put in place to protect the birds. Researchers are using ringing studies, analysis of habitats and satellite tagging (I'm sure we've all been watching the online journeys of the satellite-tracked cuckoos between Britain and Africa) to collect data.

But, as Andy Clements explained, it's people's emotional response, not scientific

Winner: Barnacle Geese, Winter afternoon by Dafila Scott

Artist, SWLA Secretary and award judge Chris Rose commented: “Dafila Scott's pastel painting of Barnacle Geese impressed the judges with its bold use of colour, expert drawing and simple composition. Her loose treatment adds life and movement and yet the drawing of the birds is as accurate as any detailed study and demonstrates an intimate understanding of the subject. Dafila Scott knows her geese! This is exactly how we see these birds in low winter sunlight – forms and shapes become lost in the abstract patterns of a tight flock until heads are raised and we can see that they are Barnacle Geese. The colours are rich but harmonise perfectly with the coloured paper she has used so expertly in unmarked areas to show sunlight. A wonderful portrayal of these much-loved birds and a deserving winner of the award.”



Flooded Fields by Kim Atkinson

This impressionistic woodcut perfectly conveys the jizz of its subjects, making the Eurasian Curlews and Northern Lapwings instantly recognisable. It is based on drawings of fields at the end of Pen Llyn, Gwynedd, which flood most winters, providing feeding and roosting for waders and wildfowl.



Arctic Terns by Robert Greenhalf

Waterbirds were a very popular subject, but this woodcut particularly impressed the judges with its authenticity – you can almost see the movement of the preening birds – achieved by spending time observing and sketching in the field.



Wylfa Terns by Brin Edwards

Working mainly in oils, Brin Edwards tends to concentrate on birds. Here, Sandwich Terns are depicted flying into Cemlyn Bay past Wylfa Nuclear Power Station. The bold lines illustrate both the industrial nature of the architecture and the delicacy of the flying birds.



evidence, that drives conservation, which is where this collaboration comes in. "Artists can add a richness to the story that the science can tell." This is an ongoing project, and next year's Out of the Frame room will feature works from the birds' staging areas in southern Europe and their British breeding grounds.

And the winner is ...

This year, the winner of the prestigious Birdwatch Artist of the Year award is Dafila Scott, daughter of ornithologist and conservationist Sir Peter Scott, with her spectacular pastel painting *Barnacle Geese, Winter afternoon*. The artist is well known for her figurative wildlife paintings, but prior to this she trained as a zoologist and spent the first part of her career studying Bewick's Swans and other waterfowl. Dafila commented: "I am very honoured to have won this prize and I'm sorry I wasn't able to be at the ceremony."

Here we present the winning piece, along with seven commended works. We hope you enjoy them! ■

This sketch of a Montagu's Harrier in Senegal by Bruce Pearson is from the Out of the Frame room, this year showing a variety of pieces by artists who travelled with the BTO to Africa. Bruce also sits on the judging panel of the Birdwatch Artist of the Year Award, along with SWLA Secretary Chris Rose, the magazine's Dominic Mitchell and Peter Antonio of co-sponsor Swarovski Optik.

ART AWARD



Sanderling by William Neill

The artist is inspired by the landscape and birds of his home on South Uist, Outer Hebrides. He explores the relationships between the birds and their environment, here showing in evocative detail a small group of Sanderling (and one lone Ringed Plover) as they feed.



Tree Scruff (Three-toed Woodpecker) by Nick Derry

A former category winner in the early years of the Artist of the Year Award, Nick Derry had several works in the exhibition, showing a range of styles and subjects, but this captivating painting in acrylics of a female Three-toed Woodpecker really caught the judges' eyes.

Whinchat, Giglio Island, Tuscany by Federico Gemma

Another previous winner, Federico Gemma's watercolour of a Whinchat impressed judges with its immediacy. The Italian artist draws from life as much as possible, saying that watercolour's capacity for rapid execution makes it ideal to use in the field.



“Artists can add a richness to the story that the science can tell”



Pine Grosbeaks and Bittersweet by Barry van Dusen

Birdwatch Managing Editor and judge Dominic Mitchell commented that this is one of those skilful paintings that manages to make bird art look easy – capturing perfectly the jizz of such charismatic birds in just a few brushstrokes.

Birdwatch World of birds

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Arriving at Reykjavik, we will enjoy the landscape of lava fields and birds, with a brief visit to the famous Blue Lagoon. We will then drive from the capital to Akureyri, stopping along the way to observe birds and the remarkable landscape of Iceland with its waterfalls and geysers.

As we head north-east, we will stop at known hot-spots to search for Harlequin Duck, Ptarmigan, White-tailed Eagle and various waders and gulls, as well as Arctic Fox. We may also encounter unexpected species at this time of migration.

We'll spend a day at Lake Mývatn, about 40 miles east of Akureyri. One of Iceland's largest lakes, it is famous for Barrow's Goldeneye and Harlequin Duck, both of which breed in Iceland but nowhere else in Europe. The surrounding area is also good for Gyr Falcon, and this will be another of our key targets.

On the morning of the final day, there will still be time to look for any missed species. We'll then leave for the harbour in Akureyri, where we board our ship and start our new adventure on the *Plancius*.

■ This tour is operated for Birdwatch by Birding Breaks (registered with the Chamber of Commerce in Amsterdam under licence number 54226104). The price includes all accommodation and food on board ship on a full-board basis, as well as expert guiding. For further information, reservations and full details of the Iceland pre-tour and what's not included, please call the company on 0031 20 77 92 030 or email info@birdingbreaks.nl.



GYR FALCON BY LAURENS STEIN



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Duck, Barrow's Goldeneye and Brünnich's Guillemot.

Other possible seabirds include Great, Pomarine, Arctic and Long-tailed Skuas, Sabine's Gull and Leach's Storm-petrel, and we'll keep a look out for shearwaters and anything unusual among the many other commoner seabirds. Several different species of whale and dolphin are also possible, as are passerine migrants which may take the opportunity to rest on board our ship. At night, if conditions are right, the *aurora borealis* (or Northern Lights) may illuminate the darkness with an ethereal green glow.

In a little over three days we'll have passed the scenic Faroe Islands and be well on the way to the legendary Fair Isle. Here, at the southernmost point of the Shetland Isles, we will land on day four and spend the entire day scouring the island for migrants. At this time of

the year Fair Isle is arguably at its finest, and rare migrants and vagrants are not uncommon. On a good day there is chance of scarcities such as Yellow-browed Warbler, Red-breasted Flycatcher, Common Rosefinch and Red-backed Shrike. We can hope for even better birds such as Lanceolated Warbler and Pechora Pipit. The seas that surround Fair Isle also offer good cetacean-watching opportunities.

We'll then sail south over the next two days through the North Sea, keeping an eye out en route for birds such as Red-throated Diver, Leach's Storm-petrel, Sooty and Manx Shearwaters and Arctic, Pomarine and Long-tailed Skuas, as well as the passerines and raptors that are sometimes lost at sea during this key migration time. On day seven our journey finally comes to an end in the Dutch port of Vlissingen.

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CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: HARLEQUIN DUCK BY MARC GUYT (WWW.AGAMI.NL), BRÜNNICH'S GUILLEMOT AND THE PLANCUS BOTH BY LAURENS STEIN



Magic moments



The most memorable occasions on a trip to Armenia might have involved species familiar to British birders, says **Bill Oddie**, but it was the context and sheer scale that made the experience so very special.

Over the past couple of years I have visited several countries on behalf of the World Land Trust. They were what one might call 'fact-finding' missions. My subsequent articles have been concerned with conservation issues, from poaching to palm oil to politics. However, now and then I have thought wouldn't it be nice to set those troubles aside and just

write about birds? So thanks to *Birdwatch* for letting me do just that!

In May I visited Armenia. Where is Armenia? No googling, or glancing at the globe! Does it have a coast? No: it is bordered – nay surrounded – by several countries often associated with Eurovision or unrest, or both: Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkey and Iran, with Russia lurking nearby. I had never

birded in any of them, so had no idea what to expect in Armenia.

Getting high

There was one connection that gave me a hint: the Caucasus Mountains. I had heard of them. I had also heard of Caucasian Snowcock and the recently rediscovered Caucasian Leopard. "What chance of seeing them?" I asked Manuk,



Top: sparsely distributed across a considerable range, Lammergeier is found in mountainous areas from southern Europe through parts of Asia and Africa, including the Caucasus region.

Left: the group enjoyed the company, food and drink of their Armenian hosts, as well as sampling the local *baklava* (above).

Blue Rock Thrush is a common breeding bird of the rocky slopes of the Caucasus.



AURELIEN AUDEVARD

is often one's first impression of a new country's bird population. Here, there were plenty of 'perchers', especially shrikes. Lesser Greys were pleasingly frequent, with their bandit masks and blushing breasts, while Red-backed were everywhere. During one 'relief stop' I saw at least 10 males.

On the wire

Considerable time and money has been spent on trying to persuade Red-backed Shrikes back to Britain, usually on the assumption that their essential habitat is heathland. But these Armenian birds were content on telegraph wires, fence posts and any scrap of bush or bramble, and it's the same in other Continental countries. So why have they forsaken Britain?

Talking of diminishing species, sharing the wires with the shrikes were Corn Buntings, just like they used to in Britain. Magpies were plentiful, just like in Britain now, as were European Bee-eaters and European Rollers, like it soon will be at home if global warming continues.

Still on the plains, we drove by a substitute sea in the form of a huge bleak lake, with a few distant gulls which we assumed were Armenian, which is considered a species by the International Ornithological Congress (IOC) but not all authorities (some still 'lumping' it). This was not an issue that interested any of my companions. What did interest them was the next location: an extensive freshwater wetland, with

our guide and driver. "The leopard, pretty unlikely," he replied. "The snowcock, a good chance as long as we can get high." Get high? Chuckling at his own accidental innuendo, he amended it to "up to the snow," which was still druggy enough to make us both laugh. But enough of such frivolities: we only had five days to do Armenia, both high and low.

Armenia is not a big country, but it is

scenically a land of extremes – either very mountainous or very flat. The lowlands are visually pretty monotonous: totally agriculturalised, with enormous fields that are green but almost hedgeless, and fairly birdless – rather like a large-scale Lincolnshire. Instead of trees, there are forests of massive electricity pylons, which means miles of power lines.

Scanning the wires while driving along



GEORGE RESZETER

The stunning Blue-cheeked Bee-eater is a species of conservation concern in Armenia.

lots of reedbeds and lagoons.

Armash is a nature reserve waiting to be designated if ever there was one. Part of it, however, is an active fish farm, and it is threatened both by bird scarers and development. It was teeming with birds, from harriers to herons, and waders to warblers, plus the most impressive wire perchers so far, that most glamorous member of a famously flamboyant family: Blue-cheeked Bee-eater. These easily upstaged the European variety which looked rather garish by comparison. My mind went back to my first and only British Blue-cheeked Bee-eater, in a garden in Shetland.

My most abiding memory of that Armenian evening was of literally thousands of Sand Martins, gathering at dusk and skimming the water in a crepuscular fly-catching frenzy. Another reminder of how things used to be in Britain? Were they really ever that good? Do you have to be my age to remember?

House call

You would have to be considerably older than me to recall when there were no houses, and several bird species hadn't yet earned their current names: House Sparrow, House Swift, House Crow and, of course, House Martin. In Armenia, we had a flashback to those prehistoric pre-building times, when the martins nested on rock faces and outside caves.

The particular cave we visited was being excavated for ancient artefacts, many of which suggested that it had once been used as a wine cellar. A couple of bats dangled in the gloom where they

belonged, but less expected was the high-rise House Martin colony at the mouth of the cave. Instead of being lined up horizontally as on a building, these nests were arranged vertically in tower blocks, with 20 or 30 on top of one another.

It struck me that the lower the residence, the less desirable – especially when nestlings stick their behinds out to defecate! That was still to come, though. Meanwhile, the swooping, fluttering, mud moulding and canoodling, accompanied by a constant chirruping, was absolutely mesmerising. Plus – every now and then

– a bird would be illuminated by the sun and glow in a way I have rarely seen at home. House Martins are not black and white, they are blue and white. Very blue.

At this point in the trip, the irony was that the most memorable moments had involved species that are still fairly common in Britain, but it was the context that made the experience so special. Never more so than when we were driving through hillier country. The landscape was mountainous, yet far from bleak. It was a wooded wonderland of ravines, rocky outcrops, cascading waterfalls, tumbling

NEIL BOWMAN

Eastern Black-eared Wheatear is common in Armenia.



The mountains of Armenia are a wooded wonderland of ravines, rocky outcrops, waterfalls, rivers and valleys. This verdant landscape provides habitat for a variety of bird species, some familiar to British birders and some more exotic.

BILL ODDIE



A scarcity in Britain, seeing this many Rose-coloured Starlings together is a treat for the British birder; the species is a regular breeding bird in Armenia.

BILL ODDIE

rivers and verdant valleys.

We stopped at a bridge and, despite the gentle rain, basked in the sheer naturalness of the sights and sounds. The valley was full of bird song, amplified and with a touch of reverb, as if subtly mixed by an extra-sensitive sound engineer.

Blackbirds never sounded better, but they couldn't compete with the Nightingales, whose chorus I interrupted by pedantically announcing that most – if not all – the singers were in fact Thrush Nightingales. I began to explain the differences, an exercise which most

of our group found no more interesting than discussing the Armenian/Herring Gull complex.

My call of "Rose-coloured Starling" was also initially received with apathy, until I guided eyes and binoculars to a hitherto boring bush, which had now acquired a crown of pink blossoms. My dissertation on the alternative name of 'Rosy Pastor' was drowned – quite understandably – by an appreciative chorus of "Wow!" and "Oh they are so pretty!" I agreed, and didn't even bother to point out the Crag Martins, or the

female Blue Rock Thrush, and certainly not the Rock Sparrow, nor even the pair of Lammergeiers soaring over the peaks.

Vodka and black

The next day, we moved on to the Caucasus Wildlife Reserve's brand new ranger's field centre, financed with help from the World Land Trust. Lounging on the veranda, we sipped vodka and nibbled baklava, while squinting through a scope to spot Mouflon on the distant hill-top. At rather closer range, Eastern Black-eared Wheatears flitted almost at our feet, while Black-headed Buntings sang heartily from almost every bush. 'Black-headed' is undeniably accurate, but hardly does justice to the birds' most conspicuous feature. Golden-underparted Black-headed Bunting would be more apt.

That evening at the lodge, we revelled in the company, food, drink and music of our Armenian hosts. We went to bed eagerly, anticipating the next day's quest, with Manuk announcing gleefully: "Tomorrow, we are going to get high!"

It didn't happen. We awoke to fog and drizzle. We couldn't even see the tops of the Caucasus Mountains, let alone go searching for snowcocks. Instead, we drove back down, had a stroll along a pebbly river that looked a bit like Wales and ate lunch at a waterside restaurant, where I had a sleeping Emperor Moth, a dangling Penduline Tit's nest, and another vodka.

It is Armenian custom to toast frequently, so here's to Armenia: beautiful country, beautiful people and beautiful birds. Why not take a trip? (And that is not another gratuitous drug reference!) ■



This House Martin colony in a cave mouth recalls the species' behaviour from the days before it nested in the eaves of buildings.

BILL ODDIE

ARMENIA

Visiting

• Armenia Information: tel (+3741) 542303/06; email help@armeniainfo.am; web www.armeniainfo.am.

• There are no direct flights to Armenia from British airports. However, several airlines run services with one or two stops, including LOT Polish Airlines (www.lot.com), Ukraine International Airlines (www.flyuia.com), Austrian Airlines (www.austrian.com) and Etihad Airways (www.etihad.com).

Further reading

• *Birds of the Middle East* by Richard Porter and Simon Aspinall (second edition, Helm Field Guides, £29.99) – order for £22.99 on page 77 or at www.birdwatch.co.uk/store.
• *A Field Guide to Birds of Armenia* by Martin S Adamian and Daniel Klem Jr (American University of Armenia, 1997).

Online resources

• An online sample of *A Field Guide to Birds of Armenia*: www.acopiancenter.am/field-guide-boac-english-common-names.asp.
• The Armenian Society for the Protection of Birds (BirdLife in Armenia): www.aspbirds.org.
• Birds in Armenia: www.armeniabirding.info.



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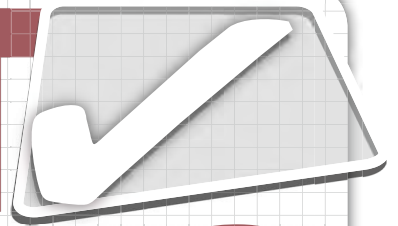


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Visual frontiers

Hawke's new, trim ED binocular punches above its weight, says **Mike Alibone**, after testing the latest addition to the company's Frontier range.

REVIEW

Hawke Frontier ED 8x32 binocular

HAWKE has broadened its portfolio with the introduction of a new mid-range binocular, the Frontier ED 8x32. This currently constitutes the only 32 mm binocular with ED glass within the Hawke range so it has immediate appeal to buyers seeking a small, lightweight model at the value end of the optics market.

And lightweight it is, too, the body being made from high-impact plastic and weighing just 500 g. Well balanced and fitting neatly into the hand, it's a binocular with which I felt instantly comfortable. If you're worried about the 'plastic' body, then don't be. I dropped it and swung it into my car's tailgate on one occasion to no detriment.

The dark green body armour appears more than fit for purpose and it is subtly textured in non-slip rubber on the outer sections with which your hands have the most contact. There are shallow cutaways or 'thumb rests' below the barrels but I felt these were not deep enough to significantly contribute to the way in which the binocular is held. The central hinge is suitably stiff, so the interpupillary distance remains in the same position, once set.

Also beneath the barrels, set back about 8 mm from the distal end, are the raised ports for the

Single eye adjustment is easy to use

Eyecups lock loosely in two positions above base



72 Photo challenge

Head to a WWT reserve to get some shots of Whooper Swan, a great winter bird and this month's photo challenge.

73 Canon can

A handy superzoom camera from Canon combines small size, light weight and a powerful zoom lens.

74 A much-needed update

The latest edition of *Finding Birds in Ireland* impresses.

75 Seabird spectacular

A new RSPB book is packed with stunning images and informative species accounts.

79 Word of the day

A free bird dictionary app covers every species listed in Britain.

79 Lingua franca

Birding – and holidaying – abroad just got easier with this translation app that uses your smartphone's camera.

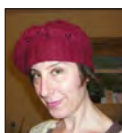
THIS MONTH'S EXPERT PANEL



MIKE ALIBONE is *Birdwatch's* Optics Editor. He has been testing binoculars and telescopes for more than a decade.



DOMINIC MITCHELL is *Birdwatch's* founder and Managing Editor. He has been birding in Britain and abroad for more than 40 years.



REBECCA ARMSTRONG has worked at *Birdwatch* for six years, reigniting a childhood love of birding.



STEVE YOUNG is Photographic Consultant for *Birdwatch* and an award-winning wildlife photographer.



ALAN TILMOUTH is a Northumberland-based birder who has had a passion for wildlife since childhood.



JOSH JONES is well known as BirdGuides' News Team Manager. He has been obsessed by all things birdy since he was a toddler.

Did you know?

ED is the abbreviation of 'extra-low dispersion', which relates to variation in the refractive index of the glass with the wavelength of light. Lower dispersion results in a reduction in chromatic aberration, enhanced colour fidelity and a sharper image. There are different grades of ED glass, with some performing significantly better than others.

tethered objective lens covers, which simply click in – or out, if they are not required. This system for keeping the lens covers on the binocular is preferable to the more commonly employed slide-on loop attachment method, which invariably results in the covers being detached and lost. The tethers, though flexible, are a little stiff, and they have a tendency to flip up in the wind, partly obscuring the objectives, although I suspect that with further use they will loosen up and hang down more, lessening the chances of this occurring.

Twist-out eyecups lock loosely in two positions above the base. While the rubber covering is rather hard, I found them quite comfortable against the eye, although I was not able to completely appreciate the full field of view – a nice, wide 133 m – in anything other than the base position.

The single eye adjustment ring is located on the right ocular. Its chunky surface makes it easy to grip and it turns freely, offering enough resistance to avoid accidental displacement, while any adjustment of the eyecup does not interfere with the dioptre setting. There is no incremental setting scale, although a tiny node on the ring marks the position set, either on the plus or minus side of a mid-point marker.

It takes approximately one-and-three-quarter anti-clockwise turns

of the ribbed central focusing wheel to take the image from 2 m to infinity. In fact I was still able to focus on objects which were only 1.9 m distant.

This binocular houses phase-corrected prisms and has fully multi-coated optics, which no doubt contribute to delivering a highly acceptable image. The colours are rich and natural and there is an overall 'warm' cast to the image. It's sharp, too, with this sharpness extending across an estimated 85-90 per cent of the field with just some noticeable softness at the periphery. It's in this part of the field of view that there is also some detectable chromatic aberration, but there's very little of this in the centre of the image.

I was surprised at just how well this binocular performed at dusk. An objective diameter

of 32 mm is not renowned for its light-gathering capacity, but I compared it against one of the top-brand models and the difference was not immense.

In summary, this tough little binocular has a lot going for it, especially when price is taken into consideration. It comes

with a black or green armoured body and the package includes an articulated rainguard, soft carry case and a broad, padded neck-strap. It's well worth a look if you are considering investing in a low-cost, compact binocular with a significant level of performance. ■

Camera action

Braun Scouting Cam 300

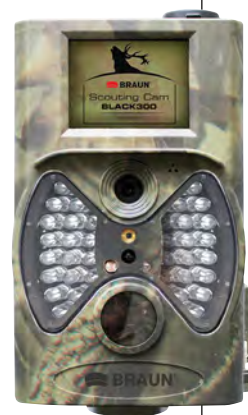
WITH the popularity of TV shows like *Springwatch*, it's fair to say that an interest in wildlife is currently riding high in Britain. This has led to a proliferation in gadgets that allow us to watch the creatures in our gardens. Kenro's new Braun Scouting Cam 300 is one such gadget.

The camera is a pretty robust-looking piece of kit. Despite some high winds during the testing period, it didn't fall off the shed, but the plastic housing appeared strong enough to withstand such a disaster should it happen. It's also easy to use – just turn it on and put it in a suitable location in the garden.

The 5 MP image sensor can take images of 5, 8 and 12 MB, while the video mode can film in both high (1080 p) and standard (720 p) definition. Quality of the daytime images is generally good, if a little over-exposed, but the night shots are somewhat lacking. In photos of a Fox sneaking into the garden, it's actually hard to see whether the animal is coming or going.

The sensor is rather too sensitive. I've got lots of photos of falling leaves or branches waving about in the wind. This also means that the battery runs out quite quickly. Another problem is that the trigger time is a bit slow for flying birds. Several images just show the garden – I think the bird that triggered the shot must have flown out of view by time the sensor reacted.

An urban garden in east London might not have been the best test for the camera. If you've got a feeding station where birds are a bit more static, and want to record the species that use it while you're at work, then this could be the camera for you. **Rebecca Armstrong**



Further info

- **Price:** £219
- **Size:** 124x108 mm
- **Weight:** 500 g
- **Field of view:** 133 m at 1,000 m
- **Light transmission:** not available
- **Close focus:** 2 m
- **Gas-filled:** yes
- **Waterproof:** yes
- **Guarantee:** 10 years

Verdict

- ✓ Image is sharp across most of the field
- ✓ Performs very well in low light levels
- ✗ Some chromatic aberration

MORE INFO Price: £160 • Dimensions: 145x80x mm • Sensor: 5 MP • Image size: 5, 8 and 12 MB • Video resolution: 720 p and 1080 p

STEVE YOUNG'S PHOTO CHALLENGE

Whooper Swan



Above: with their massive wings stretched out, landing birds can make for a spectacular photograph, bringing a 'splash' factor to your shot!

Right: try to make your images a little different by going for some extreme close-ups; a reflection is an added bonus.

IT is December and those swans, geese and waders have been flocking back to spend the winter with us, so this photo challenge relates to both season and a seasonal bird: Whooper Swan is the focus of attention for your lenses this month.

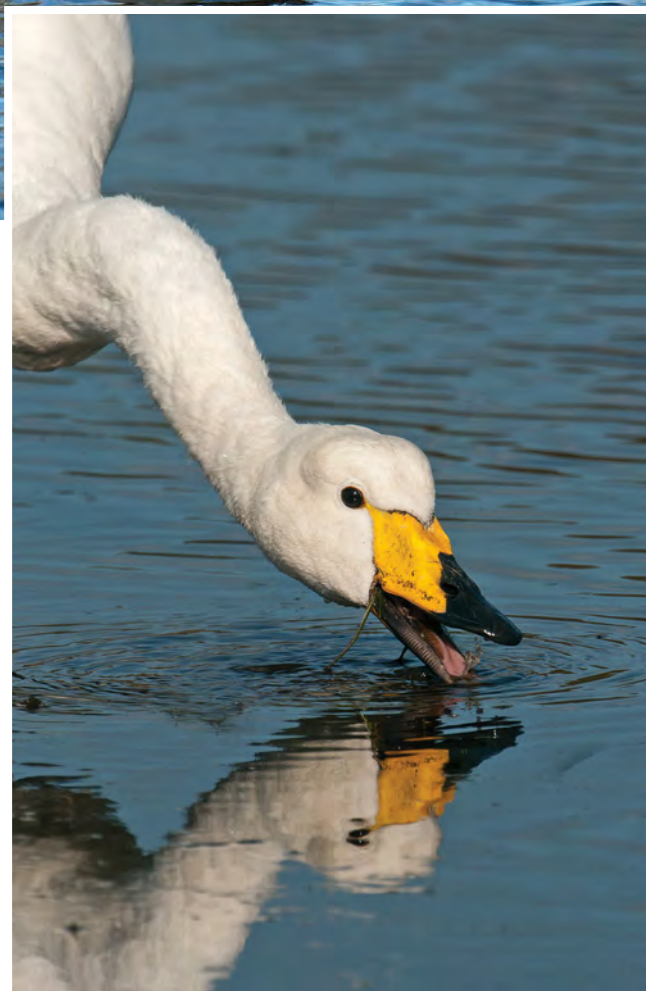
You may have to pay a visit to one of the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust centres at Martin Mere, Welney or Caerlaverock to photograph them. These sites offer great photographic opportunities where birds can come very close to the hides at feeding times (see www.wwt.org.uk for details). Alternatively, you may know of a local site where they feed in fields; perhaps you've seen this species on its breeding grounds in Iceland or you may already have plenty of images on file, but try to send in something a little bit different to win this month's prize.

Be careful with the exposures on this white bird. Images taken against dark blue water on auto-exposure may lead to the whites being over-exposed and the photos lacking detail.

We look forward to receiving lots of images for this easy photo challenge!

Email your candidates to editorial@birdwatch.co.uk; the closing date is 23 December. This month's winner will receive a copy of *Penguins: Close Encounters* by wildlife photographer David Tipling. ■

• Turn to page 93 to find out who won the October autumn challenge.



Small but mighty

REVIEW

Canon PowerShot SX700 HS superzoom

SMALL cameras with long-range zoom lenses are now a firmly established option for bird photography, but models such as the PowerShot SX700 HS refine the formula even further. Described by Canon as having an “ultra-compact and pocketable” body, this innovative camera weighs just 269 g, and in width and height (if not in thickness) is not dissimilar to a smartphone.

With its 16.1 MP CMOS sensor and 30x optical zoom lens, the SX700 HS has a specification with obvious appeal for bird photography. The lens range, encompassing an impressive 25-750 mm, covers everything from wide-angle work up to the all-important telephoto end of the scale. The model has many other useful features, including intelligent image stabilisation, manual, Av and Tv (aperture and shutter priority) modes, and full HD (1080 p) movie

recording at 60 fps.

So what's it like to use in the field? I tried it out in a range of conditions, and found it to be a good general-purpose camera with clear potential for bird photography, though with some reservations. The SX700 HS worked well for reasonably large and/or static subjects, for example gulls and wildfowl, and was also successful with butterflies. On the downside, it proved difficult to frame and compose shots of active smaller birds, and flight shots were more of a challenge.

This is partly because the SX700 HS lacks a viewfinder, meaning the user has to look at the three-inch display on the rear of the body for composition, focusing and shooting – all of which have to be achieved rapidly on mobile birds. If you're using it in the field in bright daylight,



viewing the screen and checking focus can be difficult, especially if the subject is moving.

Additionally, the ultra-compact dimensions of this model, while a boon for portability, do affect its ease of use when photographing birds: it is actually easier using a larger camera body and bulkier lens when lining up a photo. For example, Canon's heftier though still compact SX50 HS, with its electronic viewfinder and bigger lens, is easier to use for both still photography and in movie mode.

In terms of image quality, the SX700 HS produces decent results. Lenses with zoom ranges of this magnitude are by necessity an optical compromise, but work well as an 'all-in-one' solution with wide-angle, standard and telephoto options engineered into a single unit. Image quality is often better mid-range rather than at either

extreme, although anyone using this model for bird photography will often find themselves zooming up to the full 30x magnification, as I certainly did.

The SX700 HS has a range of other useful features, including full-resolution high-speed shooting, the facility to tag shots using your smartphone's GPS, and WiFi capability for the fast transfer of images without having to use a cable or remove the SD card and use a card reader. Battery life is adequate but no more, holding enough charge for about 250 shots (or 360 in eco mode).

Available for just over £200 online, it's worthy of serious consideration as an option to carry everywhere when carting around more serious kit is not practical, and for getting that quick record shot wherever you are. **Dominic Mitchell**

More info

From approx £219 • 16.1 MP sensor • 4.5-135 mm 30x zoom lens (35 mm equivalent: 25-750 mm) • ISO range 100-3,200 • 3.0" static LCD monitor • 1080p movie mode • 269 g



Macro shots such as this Speckled Wood (above) were sharp, while images of static birds like this Hooded Crow (left) were also successful.

Invaluable guide to Irish birds



SEVEN years have passed since the first edition of Eric Dempsey and Michael O'Clery's *Finding Birds in Ireland* was published, and in that time interest in birding in the country has increased. As a result, some entirely new hot-spots have been discovered (and some lost) and new species have been recorded. Given these changes and the fact that access and directions have changed for many of the existing sites, Dempsey and O'Clery have taken the opportunity to publish a fully updated second edition of their work.

The introduction has been refreshed; for example, it was nice to see that the road maps have been updated to show the altogether more extensive motorway network that Ireland now offers compared to 2007. Much like the birding scene, Ireland's roads have improved drastically in the past decade and getting around is now far less troublesome, and vastly quicker. More crucially, though, the Common Species section has had a facelift and each entry now boasts its own individual illustration – a significant improvement on the first edition's occasional plate interspersed amid the text.

But what determines whether the second edition is a worthwhile purchase is the main Sites section, and how it compares to the first: has it been updated and expanded satisfactorily? A quick glance at the index shows that the new edition contains 282 site entries, compared to 275 in the first – not a massive leap but notable nonetheless,

particularly when you consider that some now defunct sites such as Mallow Sugar Factory Lagoons and Culmore Dump have been omitted.

For anyone who isn't familiar with the original, it's worth touching on the layout of this section. Main sites are accompanied with extensive details, directions and lists of likely species season by season. Many have diagrams indicating the best time of year to visit, while the annotated maps are excellent, arguably the jewel in the crown of this section – I've always found them extremely helpful, particularly when trying to locate obscure sites along minor roads. In the latest edition some entries, such as Inishmore, Co Galway, have been redrawn and improved to reflect changes in the text.

The claim that "all of those sites described in the first edition" have been updated is generally true in the case of species lists (particularly rarities), but not so much in terms of site descriptions. I picked a few sites that I know well to compare with both the first edition and my own experiences. There are certainly some fine examples of improvement, such as the aforementioned Inishmore.

There are, however, a number of entries where text, details and directions have not really evolved where they perhaps should have. Take, for example, my west coast location of choice: Achill Island, Co Mayo. The past four or five autumns, despite relatively minimal coverage, strongly suggest that this previously near-untouched gem on the Mayo coastline offers enough to be labelled one of the west coast's most exciting locations for autumn birding. Several new sites have been unearthed, such as Keel Golf Course, which is rapidly establishing itself as one of the best locations for finding Nearctic shorebirds in western Ireland.

The book fails to mention these. In fact the only change in the text is in the 'Rarities' chapter: "Achill has potential in autumn to attract rare migrants" becomes "Achill has recently been shown to attract rare migrants in autumn". While this is true, I



have a vested interest in the site and, to me, this is bordering on lazy – a bit of research could have led to an entirely revamped and more accurate text for the area which would help prospective visitors find the best spots. The island is given a little over a page, the same as the inland Loughs Conn and Cullin – both lakes that are hardly known for their birding spectacle or rarity lists.

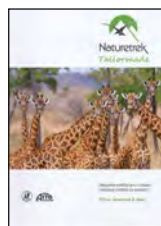
There are further examples of imbalance. For example, the near-inaccessible Inishkea Islands are allocated half a page, but the loughs and coast of south Mayo – including the brilliant Corraggaun Lough, recently proving to be one of the most promising sites for rarities in the county – are omitted entirely. The Limerick chapter fails to mention the nature reserve at Coonagh, another site that has attracted an enviable list of good birds. As a Kerry man, Michael O'Clery certainly knows the county better than I do, but I was surprised that Coosgorm Rocks was

allocated its own site and not just combined to create a fuller entry as Valentia Island – this little-watched island holds bags of potential for passerine migrants and more besides. The map at least illustrates the locations of some of the extremely tasty-looking gardens here, and one hopes it's not long before someone digs out a Nearctic wood-warbler or similar to put the place firmly on the map.

These are minor criticisms, though, and I want to point out that this is a very good book, and one that any prospective (or indeed returning) visitor to Ireland should possess. It's a more than handy reference that, crucially, gets you to the sites and gives invaluable tips on what to look for and where to look. My only gripe is that a little more effort could have been invested in updating the sites more consistently – but that should not detract too much from the quality of the publication as a whole, and indeed the great work that went into it. **Josh Jones**

DESTINATIONS

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local guides to increase the chances of connecting with all the target species.

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MORE INFO Price: brochure free on request. **Contact:** 01962 733051 or visit www.naturetrek.co.uk/tailormade.

More info

- *Finding Birds in Ireland* by Eric Dempsey and Michael O'Clery (Gill & Macmillan, 2014, Dublin).
- 400 pages, 300 illustrations, photographs and map.
- ISBN 9780717159253. Pbk, £17.99.

All at sea



WE all love seabirds, don't we? As the jacket of this new book says, "they are living links between land, air and sea... and enjoy a freedom that we can barely imagine". As a nation of island birders in an almost entirely man-made landscape, seabirds perhaps offer one of the best opportunities we have to experience the wild. This latest RSPB offering delivers a fascinating introduction to a whole range of birds that can call the sea their home, with 34 regularly occurring species given dedicated and detailed accounts. Each of the species accounts,

running to five or six pages for some, contains an Introductory section, followed by fact-packed chapters on Distribution, Population and Habitat, Behaviour and Diet, Breeding, Movements and Migration, and The Future. Marianne Taylor's accounts are thorough, well researched and very readable, finding that fine balance between accurately delivering a species' ecology and capturing the essence of its beauty, grace and appeal without descending into either the dryness of the purely factual or the glib surface-brushing that some guides of the coffee table genre deliver.

To its credit, *Seabirds* doesn't shy away from touching on some ideas and concepts that could easily have been ignored, such as hybridisation, the ring species concept in large white-headed gulls and even gular pouch angles for a certain species' subspecific identification. While these sections are brief, their inclusion lends an authenticity and depth to the book that widens its appeal.

As might be expected from a guide that features the



photography of David Tipling, the standard of images is generally very high. As this isn't an identification guide, the full range of plumages of any species isn't illustrated, but that's more than made up for by some beautiful portraits by Tipling and others that superbly deliver the character of many of these enigmatic species. The range of images of many species in flight, and the crispness and clarity of these, is notable, albeit less eye-catching than the full-page exclamation-inducing Grey Phalarope.

I was disappointed that species such as Great Northern Diver and the two rarer skua

species (Pomarine and Long-tailed) didn't merit their own accounts. Instead, these were rolled into the Other sections of their respective families, and the missed opportunity to feature the first in summer plumage in any of the images is surprising. As a northerner I eagerly scanned the Kittiwake account for mention of the Tyne's inland breeding colony – the most distant from the sea in the world – but was left wanting.

Overall this is a tidy, well-produced introduction to seabirds that delivers more than might be expected at first glance, and will be appreciated by a wide range of people. **Alan Tilmouth**

Giveaway

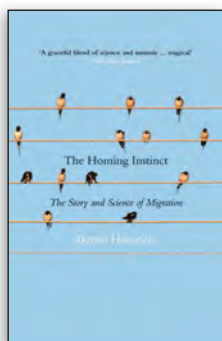
We've teamed up with Bloomsbury Publishing to give away 10 copies of *RSPB Seabirds*. Just go to our Facebook page at www.facebook.com/birdwatchmagazine and let us know your most memorable seawatching experience. Our 10 favourites will win a copy of the book. Competition closes on 14 December.

More info

- *RSPB Seabirds* by Marianne Taylor (Bloomsbury Publishing, London, 2014).
- 240 pages, 400 colour photographs.
- ISBN 978140816183. Hbk, £25.

Birdwatch Bookshop
from
£20.99

The home run



HOME: the very word conjures up feelings of safety and comfort. The desire to return home is a powerful one, and one it seems we share with much, if not all, other creatures.

This new book by Bernd Heinrich looks at that instinct in several animals, providing a

summary of current research. Written in an engaging and accessible manner, the studies are fascinating and wide ranging. They cover such diverse subjects as bees finding their way back to the hive, having discovered a food source, even if either the hive or food source is moved; salmon returning to the river of their birth to mate; albatrosses going back to their natal islands after several years roaming the oceans; and the biggest avian homecoming of all, migration.

The studies describe the what and the how well, but at times I felt the why was missing – why do these animals perform such marvellous and often life-threatening feats? Maybe this is because we don't know yet and more research is needed.

Other chapters cover choosing and making a home and 'home crashers' – those animals that appropriate homes made by others. This is something I witnessed first-hand while on holiday in Sardinia this year, when a House Martin's nest had been taken over by an opportunistic Spanish Sparrow.

Interspersed with the science are the author's own anecdotes, telling the story of his personal desire to create a home and to return to where he grew up. These add a human touch without

becoming too whimsical.

I could have done without the lengthy chapter On Home Ground, in which Heinrich describes his experiences hunting deer, in the section on attachment to place. This is, of course, an entirely personal perspective, but I don't like hunting and would have preferred not to read about it in a book of this nature.

Overall, though, this is a well-written, interesting overview of the homing instinct in animals, which is easily understandable by the lay reader. **Rebecca Armstrong**

More info

- *The Homing Instinct: the Story and Science of Migration* by Bernd Heinrich (William Collins, London, 2014).
- 352 pages, a few line drawings.
- ISBN 9780547198484. Hbk, £16.99.

P-p-p-perfect



WITH their smart, dinner-jacket-like plumage and comical waddling walk, penguins are perennial favourites with birders and non-birders alike. This new book from wildlife photographer David Tipling celebrates this popular bird family.

Tipling has been photographing penguins for more than a decade, and here are 140 stunning images covering the 17 most widely recognised species (some authorities recognise up to 22). All aspects of their behaviour are depicted, including movements between sea and breeding areas, courtship, family life and survival in often very harsh conditions.

Each photo is

accompanied by comments by the photographer, putting them all into context. There is also a fact file at the back of the book on the 17 species covered.

As might be expected from a world-renowned photographer, the images are amazing. There are shots of vast colonies of King Penguins, Rockhoppers living up to their name in the Falkland Islands, and of course, plenty of cute fluffy chicks. It's hard to choose a favourite, but the photograph of Emperor Penguin chicks huddled together in a crèche, surrounded by their parents, in the middle of a blizzard is particularly evocative.

Rebecca Armstrong



More info

- *Penguins: Close Encounters* by David Tipling (Bloomsbury Publishing, London, 2014).
- 160 pages, 140 colour photos.
- ISBN 9781472910004. Hbk, £20.

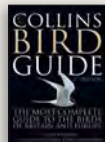
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BOOKSHELF



If you haven't got your Collins now is the time, with this strictly limited-time special offer, says **Heather O'Connor**.

ORIGINALLY launched back in 1999, the highly innovative



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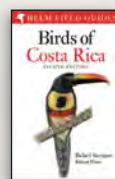
was released in 2010 to much critical acclaim as one of – if not the – best guides around.

It's safe to say that no birder's bookshelf, car or rucksack should be without this ultimate reference guide to every bird in Britain and Europe. The combination of definitive text, up-to-date distribution maps and superb illustrations is comprehensive yet fully accessible to all levels from the novice to the experienced birder. Providing all the information needed to identify any species at any time of the year, it covers size, habitat, range, identification and voice. Every species account also includes a distribution map and illustrations showing the species in all major plumages.

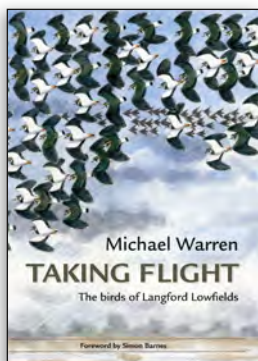
This must-have guide is on special offer in the Birdwatch Bookshop for one month only at an unbeatable price of just £13.49, so there has never been a better time to treat yourself, a family member or friend to a fantastic Christmas gift.

If you're already planning a birding trip in 2015, then check out our new country guides opposite and online. We have newly released second editions of *Birds of Costa Rica* and *Birds of New Guinea*, plus an extensive and stunningly illustrated new title, *Birds of Australia: a Photographic Guide*. You'll also find a host of other fantastic field guides at special Bookshop prices.

All our titles can be ordered online at www.birdwatch.co.uk/store or by using the form opposite. ■



Flights of fancy



LANGFORD Lowfields is currently a working quarry, but owner Lafarge Tarmac is working with the RSPB to create new habitats; the eventual aim is to restore this sand and gravel quarry on the

River Trent to become the biggest reedbed in the East Midlands.

Artist and birder Michael Warren has been visiting the site since 1989; back then he decided he would make monthly trips and record events in the pages of his sketchbook. This new book reproduces those sketches from May 1999 to April this year (an earlier book, *Langfield Lowlands*, chronicles the first 10 years).

There is something special about sketchbook art – especially when done well, as it is here. The immediacy of drawing from life in the field captures something of the essence of wildlife that even the most perfectly executed watercolour or oil painting doesn't.

Just a few rough pencil strokes

convey the jizz of such diverse birds as Northern Lapwing, Common Tern and Goldfinch. A wonderful sketch from December 2003 is just a few lines of red, brown, black and yellow, and yet it depicts the subject – Redwings and Blackbirds in hawthorn – perfectly.

The artist's notes are also reproduced, so we learn that a Honey Buzzard in September 2003 was a site tick. A total of 189 species has been recorded at the site, of which Warren has seen 173. It's worth reading his Introduction just to find out some of the reasons for his misses:

one of them involves housework!

This is a delightful book to flick through, as well as one that records important changes at a constantly evolving site. It's a joy to study the sketches, and how I wish I could produce something similar. **Rebecca Armstrong**



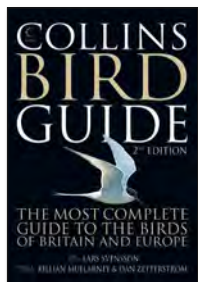
More info

- *Taking Flight: the Birds of Langford Lowfields* by Michael Warren (Mascot Media, Norfolk, 2014).
- 192 pages, colour drawings throughout.
- ISBN 9780957181182. Hbk, £30.



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Book of the month



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to identify any species at any time of the year. Superb illustrations show the species in all major plumages (including male, female, immature, in flight, at rest and feeding), while each group of birds includes an introduction which covers the major problems involved in identifying or observing them. The book also answers questions such as how to organise a successful seawatching trip and how to separate birds of prey in flight. This is the essential guide that belongs on every bookshelf and every birding trip.

* At time of going to press for paperback edition

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Marianne Taylor

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Mathieu Guillemain and Johan Elmberg

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David Cobham and Bruce Pearson

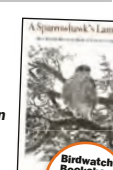
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Bird app isn't the word

REVIEW

UK Birds Dictionary

THE UK Birds Dictionary is a free app unless you want to remove the adverts, in which case it will cost you £1.99. Generally I look for the positives when reviewing any new app – some redeeming feature that might be worth investing a few megabytes of space. Unfortunately, the redeeming feature of the UK Birds Dictionary is rarer than the Alder Flycatcher that appears when opening the app.

Sadly, the single entries for every species recorded in Britain do nothing more than align a Creative Commons-sourced image of the bird with some wiki-generated text, arranged in alphabetical order. A search facility offers only vestiges of functionality. The app is little more than an aggregation of internet-based content sorted

into the easiest possible order to hang revenue-generating advertising over.

The app may be free, but it offers zero by way of originality either in content or features. The pseudo-Angry Birds cartoon logo should have been fair warning, but I ploughed on until I got to Black Lark and realised that the only free Black Lark image the app creators could find was on a stamp from Kazakhstan. The lack of any real birding insight from the developers was completely clear by the time I reached the *philippensis* Blue Rock Thrush image. This distinctive subspecies has not been recorded in Britain, and the photo was again presumably used because it was free!

I gave up when I reached the (poorly) stuffed Egyptian Nightjar.

To make our app reviews even more comprehensive, we are now running lengthier versions online. The key elements of our testing and verdict will appear in the magazine, but we are able to include more in-depth reviews, along with images and video, on the website. Visit bit.ly/bwAppReviews.



This alone should result in this app becoming a cult classic – it is by far the strangest thing I've ever come across in a bird app. **Alan Tilmouth**



More info From Martin Ogg • Free or £1.99 ad free • 41 MB • Requires iOS 7.0 or later • Version 1.0 • bit.ly/bw270UKBirdsDictionary

Breaking down language barriers

REVIEW

Word Lens

WHETHER you're a dedicated world lister or simply want to fit some time out in the field into a general family holiday, it's likely that you'll be birding abroad at some point. Unless you're lucky enough to be well versed in several languages, this could well lead to communication issues.

This new language app aims to solve at least some of those problems by providing a translation service. In theory, it's very easy to use. Select the language you want to translate from by tapping the bar at top of the screen, then hold your iPhone camera over the words. The app will translate the print, the English words appearing in place of the writing.

It does work – after a fashion. If the phone isn't held very steady, the translation flickers between the two languages, making it very hard to read. You'll need to use both hands to hold the phone and it's best to try to support your elbows in some way.

I tested it with French and

Italian, and in both cases the translation was decent, though not spot on. It was certainly close enough to get a broad understanding, which is definitely better than nothing. In fact the app's developers admit that the translation isn't perfect, "but you can get the general meaning". Further updates will no doubt seek to improve the translations.

You can refine the translation by tapping the pause button. This will 'freeze' the words on the screen and you can tap any of them to bring up a list of alternative English words. This function also works as a dictionary – tap the book icon to bring up the word list and enter a word to get a range of possible meanings.

The app is free, and you can download German, French, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese and Russian; for a limited time these are also free, but will cost £6. At the moment no other languages appear to be available, but this may well change.



I can see this app being most useful for general written language – menus, directions, street signs, food labels, newspapers and so on. It might also be of help in understanding

foreign-language field or identification guides, but more specialised words, such as bird names or places, might not appear in the app's dictionaries. **Rebecca Armstrong**

More info From Quest Visual • Free • 43.3 MB • Requires iOS 6.1 or later • Version 2.2.3 • bit.ly/bw270WordLens



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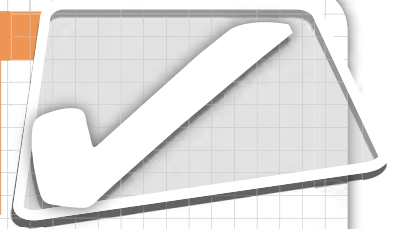


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EXPERT ADVICE



THIS MONTH'S EXPERT PANEL



CHRIS HARBARD
After many years at the RSPB, Chris is now a tour leader, writer and editor, dividing his time between Britain and the USA.



DAVID CALLAHAN
Prior to joining *Birdwatch* as staff writer, David trained as a taxonomist at the Natural History Museum.



ANDY STODDART
is a former member of the Rarities Committee with many years' birding experience, and the author of several books and ID papers.



TOM WATERS is a Wildlife Advisor in the RSPB's Wildlife Enquiries team. He has a wide-ranging interest in all nature and the environment.



MARTIN COLLINSON is a professor in genetics at the University of Aberdeen and a member of the BOU's Records Committee.



MIKE LANGMAN is a full-time bird illustrator whose work has featured in numerous books, as well as at almost every RSPB reserve.

The best tips, advice and more
www.birdwatch.co.uk



82 Building knowledge

Learn about robins from around the world at Christmas.

83 ID tips

How to recognise a Merlin – and be sure it's not a Peregrine Falcon or Sparrowhawk.

83 How to ...

Make a bird seed cake using left-overs from your seasonal cooking.

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Our panel of experts tackles your avian conundrums.

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A former gamekeeper is handed a 10-week suspended sentence for poisoning birds.

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Enjoy the spectacular sight of thousands of roosting birds.

HOW TO ...

Prevent the spread of disease in birds

DECEMBER is when birds really start to rely on the food and water in gardens. Many species will congregate in large numbers at feeding stations at this time of year. This means that there is a greater risk of disease spreading among bird populations.

These diseases are usually spread by contamination of food with the droppings or saliva of infected birds or other animals such as rats. You can help prevent this by following some easy hygiene rules.

Clean and disinfect bird tables and feeders frequently. You can make your own disinfectant by watering down domestic bleach (with 5 per cent sodium hypochlorite) to make a weak solution. Commercial products include Ark-klenz or

Tamodine-E from VetArk (www.vetark.co.uk) and Pet Virkon from the Bramton Company (www.bramton.com). Always rinse feeders thoroughly and leave to them dry before re-use. Empty and air-dry bird baths on a regular basis, too.

Locate feeders in areas where they are unlikely to become contaminated with droppings – for example not under branches or wires where birds frequently perch. Move feeders around to prevent build up of contamination in any one area and rotate between sites, so not all are in constant use – rest periods will help to reduce infection levels.

Provide clean and fresh food and drinking water regularly, and monitor your food supply carefully. If the food takes several days to clear, reduce the amount you're offering. Seed should never be left on the ground over night, as this can attract rats, which often carry diseases that sometimes

affect birds, pets and humans. Mouldy food can provide a breeding ground for parasites and bacteria.

Brushes and cleaning equipment for feeders, tables and baths should not be used for any other purposes and should not be brought into the house. Instead, keep and use them outside and away from food preparation areas. Never take your feeders inside, either. Clean and fill them outside.

Personal hygiene is also important. Wear gloves when cleaning feeders and bird tables and thoroughly wash your hands and forearms afterwards with soap and water, especially before eating or drinking. Avoid handling sick or dead birds.

For further information on garden bird diseases and their prevention see:

- www.gardenwildlifehealth.org.
- bit.ly/bw270RSPBDisease.
- bit.ly/bw270RSPBHygiene. ■

Help your garden birds stay healthy by keeping your feeders and bird tables clean.

BUILDING KNOWLEDGE

Christmas Robins

ROBIN CHITTENDEN (WWW.ROBINCHITTENDEN.CO.UK)



Robin has been a symbol of Christmas in Britain since Victorian times, when postmen wore bright red tunics, earning them the nickname 'redbreasts'. But there are plenty of other robin species around the world.

WHICH birds come to mind when you think of Christmas? Partridge, Turtle Dove, or perhaps turkey? For many people it will be Robin. While the one we associate with this time of year is the European species, there are many birds around the globe that have also been labelled as robins. Here are a few from Europe and across the world, many of which have been recorded in Britain.

European Robin *Erithacus rubecula*

Most often known simply as Robin, it was unofficially declared as Britain's national bird in December 1960. Over the centuries it has had many different local names around Britain. Ruddock and Robin Redbreast were the two most common; the official English name Robin was accepted by the British Ornithologists' Union in 1952. The red tunics worn by postmen in Victorian times earned them the nickname of 'redbreasts', and a Robin was used as an image signifying the delivery of a message, featuring on early greetings cards and now known as the familiar symbol of Christmas.

American Robin *Turdus migratorius*

When early European colonists

settled in the New World they would have looked for something familiar, and not surprisingly they named the first red-breasted bird they saw as a 'robin'. Now officially named American Robin, it is a thrush commonly found across North America, and may be on the 'Christmas list' of many British birders as it is a rare vagrant to Britain, with just 27 records since 1950. Found at this time of year over the lower half of North America and into parts of Central America, three British records have been during the Christmas period: 1963 on Scilly, 1988 in Highland and 2003 in Cornwall.

Rufous-tailed Robin *Luscinia sibilans*

Sometimes known as Swinhoe's Robin, this migrant breeds in eastern Asia. It is a Christmas robin in south-east China and South-East Asia. It is one of the rarest of the vagrant robins to reach Britain. The first was seen on Fair Isle in October 2004, with the next found dead on North Ronaldsay in October 2010. The third and most recent was seen by a few lucky people in Norfolk in October 2011.

Siberian Blue Robin *Luscinia cyane*

This extreme vagrant to Britain

also breeds in eastern Asia, and winters in south-east China and South-East Asia. There have been three British records: in October 2000 at Minsmere, Suffolk, in October 2001 on North Ronaldsay, and found dead on Foula, Shetland, in October 2011.

White-throated Robin *Irania gutturalis*

Found from south-eastern Europe eastwards, this species is extremely rare in Britain. There have been two British records: in May 1990 on Skokholm, and a well-twitched individual in June 2011 in Hartlepool. There was also a record on the Calf of Man in June 1983.

Rufous Scrub-robin *Erythropgia galactotes*

High on the list of most-wanted British birds, this species breeds as close as Spain and Portugal and yet has only been seen five times in Britain since 1950, the most recent being in Devon in 1980. It spends Christmas south of the Sahara.

Cape Robin-chat *Cossypha caffra*

This orange-breasted African chat was seen by colonists from Europe and was the nearest thing to a Robin among the

colourful new birds they saw. Its breeding season is during the Christmas period, so southern Africa is the place to find it during the festive season.

Flame Robin *Petroica phoenicea*

This charming Australian bird has a bright red breast and its size and shape are reminiscent of European Robin, so it is no wonder that, though in a different family, it earned the nickname 'Robin Redbreast', along with its relative, Scarlet Robin. An altitudinal migrant from upland areas to lowland winter quarters, at Christmas it would be on its breeding grounds.

Black Robin *Petroica traversi*

Related to Scarlet Robin, this species has no red breast, but has red credentials, being firmly on the Red list. Endemic to the Chatham Islands of New Zealand it was on the verge of extinction, with only five birds remaining by 1980. Using Tomtits as foster parents, the population increased to 100 birds by 1990, with around double this now surviving. DNA analysis shows that all of them are descended from one pair, making them the world's most inbred species. ■



Merlin

A small breeding raptor of highland areas, Merlin becomes more widespread in winter when it moves to lowland rural and coastal areas. This can result in less experienced birders needing to separate it from the more familiar Sparrowhawk or Peregrine Falcon, though with care a definitive ID can be made.

Merlin is fast and compact. It is the smallest of Britain's falcons, and is slightly smaller than male Sparrowhawk.

Its silhouette is similar to Peregrine, and when its size is not obvious this can cause confusion. However, it tends to fly with faster active wing-beats, and can often be seen directly and relentlessly chasing passerines and small waders at low level (though beware: passage birds can pass over quite high). Merlin also has a 'bouncing' thrush-like 'camouflage flight', superficially similar to Sparrowhawk's 'flap-flap-glide' style, though the

gliding in Merlin tends to involve undulating on closed wings.

Merlin's plumage is also broadly similar to Sparrowhawk in males, females and juveniles, though the flight and tail feathers are obviously much more boldly patterned with good views of female or juvenile Merlin, while the tail of male birds is mostly plain grey with a thick black terminal band. Merlin's tail is proportionately shorter and thinner than that of its two confusion species, while its wings are more pointed than 'Sprawk', in typical falcon fashion.

Despite the similarity in shape, Merlin is normally obviously smaller and slighter than Peregrine. It also lacks the well-defined black-and-white 'moustachioed' face pattern of the larger species. Male Merlins in flight have a more apparent two-tone upperwing pattern, with dark primaries and paler grey inner wing feathers. ■

HOW TO ...

Make Christmas bird cake

ONE great way to feed the birds in winter is to give them a bird cake. It can be made from a wild bird seed mixture combined with suet. Simply buy ready-to-use shredded suet from a supermarket; if you get suet from a butcher, then you should melt it down before using it. Other fats can be used but they should solidify reasonably at room temperature. If you have cooked a joint of beef, lamb, turkey or chicken then let any excess fat solidify and collect it in a tub.

When making a bird cake, use one part of fat to two parts of the seed mixture; mix it well and put it into a container to set, then either tip it out onto

a bird table or hang it from a branch. To make it special for Christmas, add one or more of these ingredients:

- **Nuts:** peanuts especially but any unsalted nut, chopped up, can be used. Walnuts, Brazil nuts, hazel nuts and even almonds can be added.
- **Fruits:** dried fruits such as raisins, currants and sultanas can all be added and are even better if soaked a little first.
- **Oatmeal:** liked by Robins, sparrows and finches, oats can be added straight from the packet.
- **Cheese:** if you have any left-over cheese rinds, or old, hard cheese, then either grate it or chop it into small chunks. ■

YOUR QUESTIONS ANSWERED

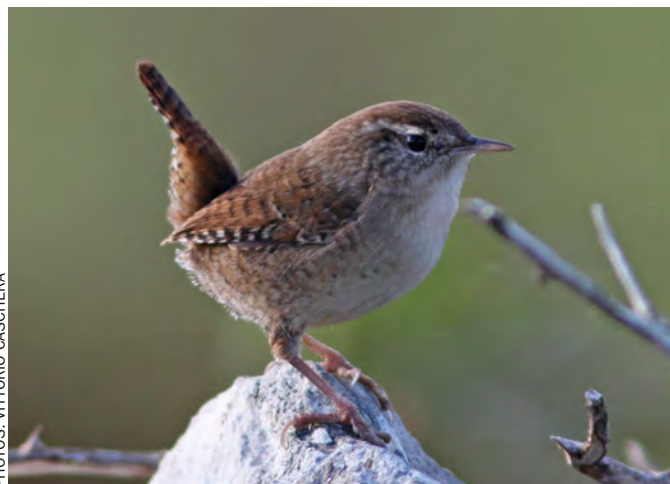
Q Six subspecies of Wren are listed for Britain, including three island forms from north and north-western Scotland, whereas there is only one for the whole of Ireland. Could there actually be other Irish subspecies too?

Wrens are found not just on the Irish mainland but, for example, on Tory Island, off the north coast of Co Donegal, and in the extreme south-west on Cape Clear Island, Co Cork. As shown in the accompanying photos – both taken at the same time of year – Wrens on these islands also look a little different: the Tory Island bird (right) appears darker, longer billed and has bigger feet. Have the characters and measurements of different Irish Wrens ever been closely examined, or their DNA analysed? Or could such difference be accounted for simply by individual variation? *Vittorio Caschera, via email*

A *Martin Collinson, Professor in Genetics, replies:* “Individual variation is a pitfall when studying isolated Wren populations, and no conclusions are possible on the basis of photographs of one bird. Very few studies have been performed specifically on Irish Wrens, and there are no genetic analyses.

“The northern Atlantic island subspecies, particularly those in bleak habitats on Iceland, the Faroe Islands and St Kilda, are indeed noticeably larger with longer bills and bigger feet, and it is to be expected that Wren populations in Ireland may show similar trends.

“Edward Armstrong studied the Wrens on the Aran Islands in the 1950s and, while he appears not to have studied their morphology closely (he was more interested in behaviour), he seems to have come to the conclusion that they were nothing very special. A genetic analysis of Irish Wrens would be useful.” ■



Could these two Wrens be of different subspecies. There are marked differences between the bird on the left (Cape Clear Island, Co Cork, 13 October 2014) and that on the right (Tory Island, Co Donegal, 23 October 2014).

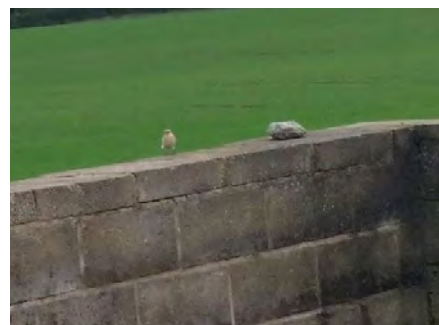
Q From Facebook Anth Cox: Can anyone identify this bird I saw on Sunday 20 October in North Yorkshire?

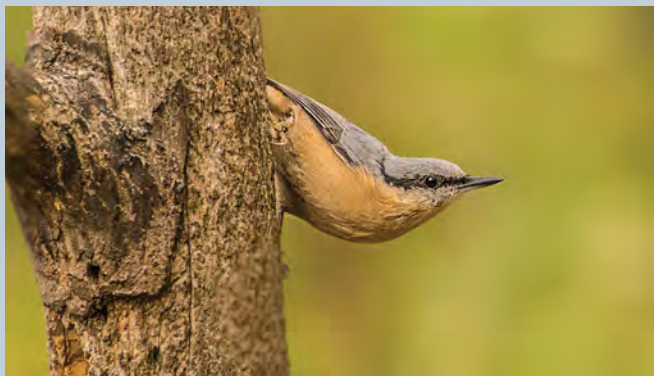
I have looked on the internet to find out what it is. Could it be a Desert Wheatear? I took the photos with my phone so they aren't very good.

A *Andy Stoddart, ID expert, says:* “I don't think this bird is 100 per cent identifiable from the photographs (below), but I think it could

actually be a Desert Wheatear. Its apparent dumpiness, soft, rather uniform 'desert-toned' plumage both above and below and possibly all-dark tail would all support that contention.

Unfortunately, however, I don't think that quite enough detail can be resolved in these images, so a Northern Wheatear also remains an option. This is a shame as the date is spot-on for a vagrant Desert Wheatear, although the odd Northern could still be around, too.” ■





Q My name is Geraint Robson and I was hoping to get some constructive criticism on my photos. I find this type of criticism very hard to come by as people tend to only offer praise.

I find this a little frustrating, despite photography being a hobby I enjoy, because one of the best things that could happen is for my photos to be published, yet I am finding a fellow birder is more successful in this area than I am, despite his photos being of a lesser quality to most of our group, in my opinion. This makes me wonder if there is something wrong with my own photos, which is why I need the constructive criticism. You can find a selection of my images here: www.500px.com/TheBirdGarden. Geraint Robson, via email

A Steve Young replies: "When you say you want your photos to be published do you mean in the likes of magazines such as *Birdwatch* or other publications? I ask because browsing through your photos, the species there will have limited appeal to *Birdwatch*, but may be of use to a local Wildlife Trust.

Your images are fine, although many have heads turned away slightly, which any picture editor would discard, plus some of the backgrounds are very messy looking – presumably you are using a public feeding station for many of your shots and have no control over perches or backgrounds? My two favourite images were the Grey Heron in black and white and the Nuthatch titled Nuttery (both pictured above); and I think your female Mallard is in fact an eclipse male!

The problem these days is that the competition is intense for bird photography and the quality of images is very, very high. Take a look



www.birdguides.com and click on the Iris link on the left and see what others are taking. We receive between 600-800 photos per week. If you go to www.alamy.com which is a very popular picture agency used by many books, newspapers and so on and, for example, type in European Robin you'll find that more than 2,000 images come up, so photos have to stand out to be chosen by a picture researcher and be published.

With so many websites, blogs and social media to look through these days, for anyone's images to get noticed above the rest is very difficult. Digital has made bird photography incredibly easy compared to the days of film, and editors and picture researchers have an amazing amount of choice.

My advice is to just carry on taking photos and enjoy them for yourself and anyone else who wishes to share them. When you say that another birder's photos are being published, unless I can see his photos and compare them to yours, I can't comment on why this should be. Do you know who is publishing them?" ■

Q Recently, in the early morning sunlight of a warm day, I saw three Woodpigeons on the neighbouring telegraph wires. They appeared to be purposefully exercising, with much vigorous wobbling and wing and tail flapping. They did this non-stop for 4-5 minutes and then flew off together. Was this just *jole de vivre* or is there some other explanation for this behaviour? Arnold Hitchon, via email

A Tom Waters, of the RSPB Wildlife Enquiries Team, replies: "Many bird species spend much time preening and sunbathing, most often on sunny but cold mornings. Some birds use the sunlight to remove pests from feathers; Blackbirds are known to sunbathe as the light helps to remove feather mites. It is likely that the pigeons were preening in this way; they choose wind-sheltered areas, usually with a wall or cliff-face behind them to create a suntrap, and can move their wings to get to all those 'hard-to-reach areas'. Pigeons also have monocular rather than binocular vision so they bob their heads for depth of perception. ■

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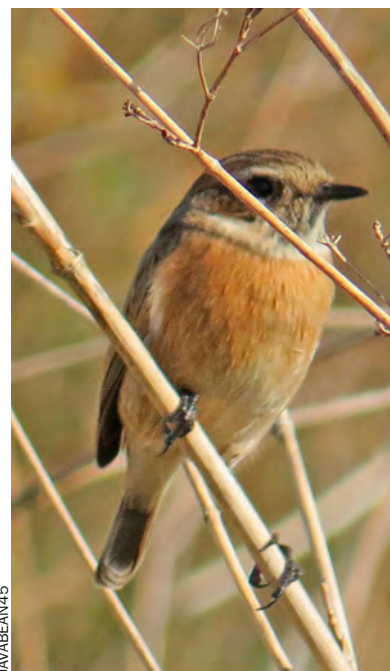
forums at www.birdwatch.co.uk/forums, or by emailing editorial@birdwatch.co.uk or by writing

in to: **Your Questions Answered, Birdwatch, The Chocolate Factory, 5 Clarendon Road, London N22 6XJ.**

Q From the forum *javabeen45*: I snapped this little chap in the Murcia region of Spain in October, but was struggling to positively ID it. Any help or suggestions appreciated. Could it be a European Stonechat?

A Andy Stoddart, ID expert, says: "Yes, this is indeed a European Stonechat. The upright posture, pleasingly plump, Robin-like body, short wings and large, rounded head are all typical of the stonechat family, and European Stonechat is the default species in Spain. More specifically, however,

the rich 'burnt' orange underparts, pale-looking throat with dark feather bases and uniform brown head with just a diffuse supercilium are all characteristic of a female European Stonechat. In October this could be either a local bird or a migrant from further north in Europe." ■



JAVABEAN45

ON OUR WEBSITE

Norfolk gamekeeper sentenced for raptor poisoning

ALLEN Lambert, a former gamekeeper, was handed just a 10-week suspended sentence and ordered to pay £930 in costs in November.

Lambert, 65, formerly a gamekeeper on the on the Stody Estate, near Holt in Norfolk, was found guilty on 1 October 2014 at Norwich Magistrates Court of two charges relating to the killing of 10 Common Buzzards and a Sparrowhawk, as well as possession of pesticides and other items to prepare poisoned baits. He had earlier pleaded guilty to five charges relating to the possession of nine dead buzzards, possession and use of banned pesticides Mevinphos and Aldicarb and breach of a firearms certificate.

While appreciative of the fact that Lambert was found guilty, many in conservation circles believe the sentence to be too lenient.

Bob Elliot, Head of RSPB Investigations, said: "This is the worst case of bird of prey poisoning we are aware of in England, and one of the worst in the UK. Finding the carcasses of nine poisoned buzzards in a bag at Lambert's home was truly dreadful. Unfortunately this is a part of a wider national problem."

In sentencing, District Judge Peter Veits criticised the running of shooting estates. He said: "Those who employ gamekeepers have a strict duty to know what is being done in their name and on their property. They also have a duty to ensure that their gamekeepers are properly trained and capable of keeping abreast of the complex laws relating to the use of poisons.

"In other industries, employers as well as the employee could

The poisoned Common Buzzards were discovered by police in a bag on Lambert's property.



WWW.RSPB-IMAGES.COM

be facing prosecution in such cases, and I hope that this case can serve as a wake-up call to all who run estates as to their duties. It is clear that the buzzard population in Norfolk is increasing and this is something to be applauded and not seen as an inconvenience by those who choose to run shoots."

The sentencing came only a week after the RSPB issued a challenge to leaders among the shooting community to step up and acknowledge the problem of illegal persecution in Britain, and take action to stop the killing. ■

• bit.ly/bw270GamekeeperSentenced

In the digital edition

ADDITIONAL material in the December digital edition includes:

- Videos and more photos of Common and Rough-legged Buzzards.
- Footage from the 2014 Champions of the Flyway.
- Plus bonus images and film of the month's rarities and scarcities.

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Visit www.pocketmags.com/birdwatch to find out more. ■



LISTCHECK

Updating avian taxonomy

Fulmar split on the cards

THE familiar Northern Fulmar *Fulmaris glacialis* breeds widely around British and Irish coasts and is a frequent sight on seawatches. Its North Atlantic distribution extends north-east far into Russian Arctic waters and west into the Canadian Arctic. Those who have encountered fulmars even farther afield, in the Pacific, may now be in line for an armchair tick.

Currently regarded as a Holarctic species, its taxonomic history has been muddled by variation which includes a range of morphs and differences in bill size. The International Ornithological Congress (IOC) recognises two Atlantic subspecies, *glacialis* and *auduboni* (the taxon occurring in Britain), and another in the Pacific, *rodgersii*.

A recent phylogenetic analysis (Kerr and Dove 2013) has found these two oceanic populations to be highly divergent, at a level consistent with that observed between many other species of Procellariiformes. Accordingly, the authors recommend elevating them to the level of separate species. 'Pacific Fulmar' has yet to be confirmed in the Atlantic, though lookalikes have occasionally caused a stir in Europe – fully resolving the ID differences in the field will be the next puzzle to solve. ■

References

- Kerr, K C R, and Dove, C J. 2013. Delimiting shades of gray: phylogeography of the Northern Fulmar, *Fulmarus glacialis*. *Ecology and Evolution* 3: 1,915-1,930.

• bit.ly/bwListcheck



New research has found that the Pacific subspecies of Northern Fulmar is different enough from North Atlantic birds (pictured) to be a full species.

HANS HILLEWAERT (COMMONS.WIKIMEDIA.ORG)

HOW TO ...

See winter roosts

ROBIN CHITTENDEN (WWW.ROBINCHITTENDEN.CO.UK)



Thousands of Rooks gather in huge roosts at Buckenham Marshes RSPB, Norfolk.

WINTER is when many birds roost together, especially when the weather is very cold. Sometimes these gatherings can be spectacular, with large numbers of common birds, or small numbers of special species. Here are 10 ways to see such roosts:

1 Red Kite

With Red Kite firmly re-established as a breeding bird in England and Scotland, there are now opportunities to see roosts where hundreds of birds may gather. Good places include Fineshade Woods, near Corby, Northamptonshire (www.facebook.com/FineshadeWood), and the Galloway Kite Trail, Bellymack Hill Farm, Dumfries and Galloway (www.gallowaykitetrail.com).

2 Waders

The sight of a swirling flock of thousands of Knot is an unforgettable experience. High-tide roosts can be found on most large estuaries. One of the most spectacular is at Snettisham RSPB, Norfolk (www.rspb.org.uk), with other good ones at Morecambe Bay and the Ribble Estuary, Lancashire (www.ribblecoastandwetlands.com). For the best experience visit during the highest tides, which will be around 6-8 and 24-25 December this year; try to arrive an hour before high tide.

3 Pied Wagtail

Winter roosts of Pied Wagtails can look like Christmas lights dotted around the branches

of a bare tree. Their natural roosts are in reedbeds, but many have adapted to a more urban environment, taking advantage of the slightly warmer temperatures and shelter that city centres can supply. Good roosts have been seen in Bristol, Cheltenham and Exeter, and also at Heathrow Terminal 5.

4 Starling

Known as a murmuration, these gatherings are a true spectacle, with birds wheeling around in a swirling cloud. One famous roost is at Brighton pier, East Sussex, with others at Ham Wall RSPB, Somerset, Leighton Moss RSPB, Lancashire, Newport Wetlands RSPB, Gwent, Snape, Suffolk, and Saltholme RSPB, Co Durham. See www.rspb.org.uk.

5 Harriers

Hen Harriers will often roost together, and in reedbeds they will sometimes be joined by Marsh Harriers, too. Try visiting Stubbs Mill, Hickling, and Titchwell Marsh RSPB in Norfolk. Warham Greens, Norfolk, is also good, and often holds Short-eared Owls as well.

6 Crows

Crows will often roost in large mixed flocks and can be tracked to their roosts as they fly to them from the surrounding countryside. Buckenham Marshes RSPB, Norfolk, is well known for its corvid roost which holds thousands of Jackdaws and

Rooks. Try to find your local one by following the birds as they make their way there.

7 Swans

A flock of wild swans coming in to roost in the evening is a great way to finish off a day's birding. The best places to observe this are the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust reserves at Welney, Norfolk, for Whooper and Bewick's Swans, and Slimbridge, Gloucestershire, for Bewick's Swans. See www.wwt.org.uk.

8 Geese

Watching geese leave their roost on a dawn flight from Caerlaverock WWT, Dumfries and Galloway, is an amazing sight. Snettisham RSPB, Norfolk, is a great place to see Pink-footed Geese leaving their roost. See www.rspb.org.uk and www.wwt.org.uk.

9 Long-eared Owl

Communal roosts of Long-eared Owls are usually found in bushes and trees such as willow, blackthorn or hawthorn, often near water. Roosts can be a few birds up to as many as 40. Try Saltholme RSPB, Co Durham, Fairburn Ings RSPB, West Yorkshire, Marton Mere, Lancashire, and Pennington Flash, Greater Manchester. Sadly, few accessible roosts remain in the south.

10 Hawfinch

Often a difficult bird to find, there are a few places where many individuals may gather at a roost: Bedgebury Pinetum, Kent, Blackwater Arboretum, Hampshire, Lynford Arboretum, Norfolk, and Nagshead RSPB/Parkend, Forest of Dean, Gloucestershire. ■

SUNDAY HIGH TIDES IN DECEMBER

Full moon date is Thursday 6 December

	7th	14th	21st	28th
Exe Estuary (Starcross)	07.03	11.25	05.56	11.15
Devon	19.25	23.57	18.21	23.47
Poole Harbour (town quay)	09.12	02.53	08.17	01.49
Dorset	21.40	14.10	20.44	13.43
Langstone Harbour (Northney)	11.53	04.27	10.50	04.06
Hampshire	–	16.45	23.19	16.29
Thames Estuary (Sheerness)	00.33	05.08	11.44	04.56
Kent	12.53	17.45	–	17.31
London Bridge	01.50	06.22	00.36	06.10
Greater London	14.11	18.57	13.00	18.44
Colne Estuary (Wivenhoe)	00.10	04.43	11.21	04.29
Essex	12.28	17.17	23.47	17.04
Blakeney Harbour	06.46	11.51	05.41	11.23
Norfolk	19.06	–	18.04	23.52
Hunstanton	06.31	11.24	05.26	11.02
Norfolk	18.49	23.34	17.49	23.20
Blacktoft	06.53	11.56	05.46	11.28
Yorkshire	19.13	–	18.09	23.55

	7th	14th	21st	28th
Teesmouth	03.45	08.41	02.39	08.19
Durham/Yorkshire	16.02	20.48	15.02	20.34
Holy Island	02.33	07.14	01.24	06.56
Northumberland	14.49	19.31	13.44	19.19
Firth of Forth (Cockenzie)	02.50	07.32	01.42	07.18
Lothian	15.07	19.39	14.06	19.31
Morecambe Bay	11.31	10.27	10.28	03.39
Lancashire	23.51	23.03	22.51	16.05
Dee Estuary (Hilbre)	11.08	03.43	04.33	03.17
Cheshire	23.27	16.02	17.01	15.42
Loughor Estuary (Burry Port)	06.26	11.14	05.23	10.55
Carmarthenshire	18.46	23.45	17.45	23.27
Severn Estuary (Berkeley)	08.05	00.26	06.59	00.01
Gloucestershire	20.25	12.50	19.22	12.29
Belfast	11.17	04.04	10.12	03.38
Co Down	23.40	16.12	22.35	15.55
Dublin (North Wall)	11.54	04.31	10.51	04.12
Co Dublin	–	16.41	23.16	16.29



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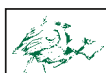
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In the next issue
January

BLACK REDSTART BY STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

Town and
city birding

■ We focus on the great birding
to be had in Britain's built-up
environments, starting with
fantastic January itineraries in
and around London, the West
Midlands, Manchester, Weymouth,
Glasgow and Belfast.

■ January's issue also explores
man-made habitats and their importance
to birds, from flooded industrial workings and reservoirs to
town parks and gardens.

■ Back yards also come into their own in Big Garden
Birdwatch month, with a special look at bird feeding and
sustainability in the bird food industry.

Plus

■ ID photo guide to Canada and Cackling Geese – learn
how to separate these common and rare species with
certainty.

■ As New Year listing gets under way, Chris Harbard looks
at the arguments for and against ticking heard-only birds.
■ RSPB Chief Executive Mike Clarke reveals why it's crucial
for Britain's birdlife that the EU doesn't downgrade legal
protection for birds.

Also: the winners of the Birdwatch Birders' Choice Awards revealed, all the latest rarity highlights and big stories, bird news round-ups from the top team at BirdGuides.com, Viking's new 50 mm mini-scope, book, app and software reviews, columnists Mark Avery and Lucy McRobert, and essential questions answered by our expert panel of ornithologists.

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Keep it down!

THE Island Mere Hide at Minsmere RSPB, Suffolk, is one of the loveliest places in Britain to enjoy the last hour or two of daylight. With panoramic views of extensive reedbeds set against a distant backdrop of farmland and woodland, it also offers one of the finest soundscapes in East Anglia.

In the warmer months, the air is full of the song of Reed Warblers, while Bearded Tits 'ping' and Cetti's Warblers make their explosive outbursts. In the winter, Water Rails squeal over the rustle of dry reeds, and you can hear the soft calls of Eurasian Teal and whistles of Eurasian Wigeon. As you wait for the arrival of the wild swans that roost on the mere, in the far distance the lights begin to come on in the tiny hamlet of Eastbridge, reminding you of civilisation and the allure of the open fire in the Eel's Foot Inn. The word 'atmospheric' was surely coined for Island Mere.

When I lived in Suffolk, this hide was my sanctuary, especially at the end of the working week. Now, as a more occasional visitor, it still draws me back whenever I have free time at dusk. I have even accepted and grown to like that hide, with its annoying



IAN BARTHORPE (WWW.RSPB-IMAGES.COM)

Island Mere Hide at Minsmere RSPB, Suffolk, offers fantastic views across extensive reedbeds.

windows and chairs, and taken as payback that one can move around it quietly, keeping an eye on the various channels and breaks in the reeds, without getting stuck down at the end furthest from the action, views frustratingly blocked by others.

Increasingly, though, I am finding my evening experiences at Minsmere completely spoilt by the loud conversation of 'hide bores'. A recent visit was typical, with one bird photographer holding forth on vultures he'd seen in Africa – all at a volume

that forced everyone in the hide (and it's a big hide) to listen. As soon as he'd driven out the group he was talking to, another bird photographer sparked him off in a second conversation about camera technicalities.

Needless to say, the evening magic was gone, and hearing the birds was almost impossible. I quietly asked them if they could lower their voices, which they did marginally, but not enjoying confrontations I found the rest of my stay there distinctly uncomfortable until they left.

Hide bores – we are not interested in your boasts of what you've seen overseas, and many of us could 'out-bird' you in any case. Unlike you, however, we feel no need to lower ourselves in this way and we've got better things to do when visiting one of Britain's loveliest places. Enjoy the birds that are in the present. And keep your loud conversations for the pub – apparently there are some very nice ones in the next county!

Alan Pearson, via email

Begging belief

I have been a Dublin-based member of the RSPB and a reader of your magazine for several years, and I'm writing to compliment you on October's editorial in particular (*Birdwatch* 268: 3) and the publication in general. The Hen Harrier issue (*Birdwatch* 266) makes for sad reading, and I hope that action will be taken to address the behaviour of estate owners before it is too late.

When the RSPB sought the approval of its membership to incorporate wildlife in general under its banner, I disapproved completely. The UK has plenty of Wildlife Trusts and I could not understand why the RSPB wanted to infringe on their objectives; indeed, I wondered at the time what discussions if any took place between the various parties. The RSPB is very good at passing the begging bowl, but based on the figures in your article, it will – I believe – find the need to increase the amount of begging!

Ian Kelly, via email

Mystery history

OVER the past few issues I have enjoyed the recent article and letters regarding Herbert Axell's regime at Minsmere RSPB, Suffolk, and thought I would add my two penn'orth.

As well as watching wildlife, I also collect natural history books – too many in all fairness – and if they are signed, that's all the better. Some years ago, on one of my regular charity shop trawls, I picked up a 1977 copy of *Minsmere: Portrait of a Bird Reserve* by Herbert Axell and Eric Hosking. On the inside cover is the inscription "Reggie and Joyce: those happy days we had at Minsmere! Herbert".

The question I have often asked myself is does the name 'Herbert' refer to Mr Axell himself and, if so, who are Reggie and Joyce? Does anyone out there know? I really do love a book that has history attached to it.

Steve Edwards, via email

Controlling the culls

I'VE just been reading the letters section in November's *Birdwatch*, and felt I had to respond to Chris Beswick's letter about the Badger cull (page 92), which states that he has "serious concerns that an animal with no natural enemy, whose population is allowed to increase unabated, will have devastating consequences for wildlife in general".

I wholeheartedly agree – look at mankind! I think this is where the problem lies, not with Badgers. The Badger cull is a Coalition bid to win votes from the farming community and to protect Pheasant shoots, nothing more – pretty much in the same way that Common Buzzards and gulls

are culled to protect non-native species that are shot for sport. Humans are the species that needs to be kept in check, not Badgers.

Tim Farr, via email

Fingers crossed!

JUST to say thanks for putting our Spurnmigrationfest2014 and Spurn itself forward for this year's Birdwatch Birders' Choice Awards.

As a subscriber of the magazine for many years, I think it's a fantastic idea.

We are all looking forward to hearing from you shortly!

Andrew Dalton, Potteric Carr Programme Manager, via email

Reader Malcolm Brown took this photo of a leucistic Magpie. He commented: "I thought you might be interested in this white Magpie. I have seen it on numerous occasions on my drive home from work. It hangs around with a group of Magpies; it is a little thinner than the rest, but otherwise healthy."



STEVE YOUNG'S PHOTO CHALLENGE

The winner



OCTOBER'S challenge was to submit images that summed up autumn.

Steve Young commented: "There was an excellent selection of images for the autumn photo challenge, with some really strong entries. I was particularly torn between two photos before making my decision.

"But only one can win, and this month I've gone for this cracking shot of a Wren by Trevor Guy. This species is a classic autumn migrant, and there's also a nice splash of seasonal berry colour, plus the bird has extended its tongue.

"Altogether a perfect autumn shot that wins this month's prize, a copy of Ron Toft's *National Birds of the World*."

- Turn to page 72 for this month's photo challenge.

Join the debate online

You can use our Facebook page to comment on all the latest birding news, which is updated on a daily basis.

facebook

- The news that gamekeeper Allan Lambert was given a suspended sentence for poisoning birds understandably caused much anger:

Robert Morsley: "'Worst case of poisoning' and judge effectively says he is lying in court – and he just gets a suspended sentence. What kind of deterrent is that?" <shaking head>

Ron Colson: "The Old Boys' Club rules ok. Disgraceful outcome. I believe his employer should face prosecution as an accessory. But having said that, rich landowners, estate owners, judges and the elite in society look after their own."

Pip Teachugger McCluskey: "Either a species is protected or it isn't. In this case it's clear that the judge has no qualms about letting a law breaker go free."

Christopher M Hall: "Too lenient. The judge should have made an example of this man. Justice was not done."

Kevin Overton: "What deterrent is that? Disgraceful sentence. Many judges are landowners who care little for wildlife or the laws that are supposed to protect it!"

Stephen Coupland: "A 10-week suspended sentence sends a message out that judges in this country are out of touch and still form part of the aristocracy. It is real life *Downton Abbey* where the law protects the landed gentry and their shooting rights."

twitter

- Our Birders' Choice Awards received many comments; here is a selection of our favourites:

@chiffchat: "A vote for @chiffchat is a vote for a better Britain. 'At BirdwatchExtra Strong contenders in Book of the Year'."

@chiffchat: "By the way, voted for Packham as conservation hero of the year in @BirdwatchExtra poll. Genuine hero."

@BlackLabrador10: "Had a fabulous day @Leighton_moss y'day, my favourite nature reserve. Really hope you win @BirdwatchExtra Birders' Choice Award 2014."

@mickey431: "Totally agree about Leighton Moss; great site."

@worldlandtrust: "@ChrisGPackham, @BillOddie & @puro_coffee all included in the nominees for @BirdwatchExtra Birders' Choice Awards."

@carolineluft: "#henharrierday with @MarkAvery @ChrisGPackham @WildeAboutBirds and hundreds more people."

- On asking if Mark Avery is your Conservation Hero of the Year:

@BestBirdingGal: "Yes he is for sure!"

@vivthesetter: "You're darned tootin' he is."

- Follow us on Facebook at www.facebook.com/birdwatchmagazine and Twitter at www.twitter.com/BirdwatchExtra to keep up with the news, opinions and controversies, post your own photos and comments, enter bonus competitions and read interesting snippets from the world of birding.



MARK COCKER

Rhyme and reason

Can poetry change the world? **Mark Cocker** thinks so, which is why he believes that forging a link between verse and conservation is so important.

The link between birds and poetry may be ancient, but it seems that the British are uniquely susceptible to combining the two. The novelist Aldous Huxley suggested that if you took out all the references to birds from British verse you'd probably have to get rid of half the canon.

But poetry and conservation? Now there's a more challenging combination. For the last few years the RSPB's own poet and literary impresario Matt Howard has been encouraging these two unlikely bedfellows to make music through a nature-writing competition (bit.ly/bw270PoetryCompetition).

Such literary contests are a common staple in the world of letters. Essentially, hopeful writers pay a fee to submit examples of their work. The subscriptions bankroll the competition prizes, and also cover next year's set-up costs. The RSPB-Rialto Nature Poetry Competition adds a new ingredient to the mix, because the profits are invested in helping wildlife. As Matt Howard explained: "It turns the writer's creative energy into funds for conservation and puts poetry at the lug end of a spade." To date around £27,000 has been raised.

The project got off to a flying start when it secured Andrew Motion as its first judge. Last year it was the turn of Ruth Padel, who is both a celebrated poet and a passionate conservationist, which is fitting in the great granddaughter of Charles Darwin. The scheme looks set to expand in 2015 with a top prize of £1,000 and runners-up awards of £500 and a week's course at Ty Newydd, the National Writers' Centre of Wales worth £500.

The organisers are fortunate to have secured the judging services of Simon Armitage, one of Britain's best-known poets. Less well publicised perhaps is his love for ornithology. Armitage must be the only winner of the Keats-Shelley Prize for Poetry with a subscription to *British Birds*. He is also co-editor with Tim Dee of an anthology entitled *The Poetry of Birds*, the best of several recent collections on nature.

Matt Howard doesn't think it odd that naturalists and poets demonstrate these recurring links. He suggests that a commitment to wildlife and writing poetry involve the same basic skills set: a mixture of patience,

absorption and very careful observation. He also proposes another reason for the success of a poetry competition specifically concerned with nature.

Environmental concern

Increasingly, people are troubled by the systemic threat to British nature posed by our maltreatment of the landscape. Yet not all our responses take a direct form. While some might march the streets bearing placards, others seek a private outlet for their concern.

Conservation, according to Howard, is not just about boots on the ground, it is about changing hearts and minds, and poetry is an essential part of that persuasive mix. Yet one cannot help wondering about poetry's ability to have real impact. Is it too much of a minority pursuit? W H Auden, no stranger to either politics or the iambic pentameter, once conceded that 'poetry makes nothing happen'.

This autumn I had reason to recall Auden's famous line on a visit to the Lake District. In all our fascination with this region you can trace the impact of writers like Alfred Wainwright and his evergreen walking guides, or A Harry Griffin's dozen books on mountaineering. Infused in their work you sense the influence of John Ruskin, who lived on Lake Coniston's shores for half his life and spent all of it extolling the central place of nature in human welfare. But behind them all, spiritual godfather to the whole movement that celebrates wildlife and nature, is William Wordsworth. When we were there thousands of visitors poured past his tiny cottage at Grasmere or trooped to his grave as if it were a shrine.

I doubt many of them were very familiar with his verse. I suspect even fewer knew, when he first wrote of nature in the Lake District, that his poetry was initially dismissed or condemned. Yet within 50 years the crowds were flocking to his house as if it were a living monument like Skiddaw or Helvellyn. It is no exaggeration to claim that Wordsworth's poetry directed an entire nation to the power of these hills. Poetry may make nothing happen instantly but, my goodness, give it a little time and it can change everything. ■

Mark Cocker returns in the February issue.



PORTRAIT BY BENJAMIN ROBERT HAYDON (COMMONS.WIKIMEDIA.ORG)

William Wordsworth is the spiritual godfather of the literary movement that celebrates nature, but his first wildlife poems were initially met with criticism.

“Poetry may make nothing happen instantly but, my goodness, give it a little time and it can change everything”

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